MILTON'S SENSE OF VOCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Students and biographers of Milton concur in the opinion that his actions were manifestations of an inward conviction of a divine calling. This feeling that his was a sacred mission on earth with a definite function to perform constitutes what is referred to as Milton's sense of vocation. Each writer who treats this aspect of Milton's character has his own opinion of the influence of this idea on the course of his life. All agree, generally, that this idea underlay the activity of his youth and early manhood, but when they reach the period of his political activity, their opinions become widely divergent.

A. W. Verity, in his preface to an edition of Paradise Lost, posed the question: "Should Milton have continued in the path of learned leisure?" After citing anonymous critics on this point, Mr. Verity concluded that the consensus of critical opinion is that Milton sacrificed twenty years of his life doing work not worth doing and had he continued the life of contemplative solitude, another Comus or a loftier Lycidas might have been the result.[1]

Walter Raleigh, a Milton scholar of some distinction, speaks regretfully of Milton's political activity:

> To have Pegasus in harness is bad enough; but when the wagon that he draws is immovably stuck in the mud, and he himself bespattered by his efforts, the spectacle is yet more pitiable.[2]

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1 A. W. Verity, Milton, Paradise Lost, p. xix.

2 Walter Raleigh, Milton, p. 36.

Dora Raymond, in her biography of Milton, speaks of this phase as a "perilous trafficking with Providence" in which Milton employed ways devious "sometimes to the point of appearing iniquitous."[3] E. M. Tillyard seems to agree with the opinion reached by Mr. Verity:

> When Milton entered politics he was. . .most plainly an idealist, a young man with a passion for reforming the world. . .but the trend of politics ruined his hopes before he could turn them into literature. Had the promise of Lycidas been fulfilled, had his ardour received no untimely check, he might have written, perhaps near the date of Areopagitica, a poem of hope, whose hero had the power of action without the dubious morality of Satan, and the impetus of whose verse matched throughout the first two books of Paradise Lost.[4]

George Saintsbury, the critic and historian, refers to Milton's life as a trilogy, "the second part of which had hardly anything to do with the first, though the third resumed and completed it."[5] Mark Pattison bewails the period and labels it an "episode which fills twenty years and those the most vigorous years of mankind." He sums up the ideas which seem to prompt the most criticism in this statement:

> So important did he regard this claim that he allowed it to override the proposed dedication of his life to poetry.[6]

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3 Dora Raymond, Oliver's Secretary, p. 176.

4 E. M. Tillyard, Milton, p. 112.

5 George Saintsbury, Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. III, p. 114.

6 Mark Pattison, Milton, p. 61.

It is to be readily admitted that Milton's activity during this period might appear as a regrettable digression, since such activity cannot be supposed to have contributed directly to the conscious personal ennoblement which Milton sought as a part of his plan. The fact that he gave so much time and energy to politics after having announced his ambition to produce a work "the world will not willingly let die" would cause differences of opinions as to the motives which prompted him to this action--action which appears incongruous in the total plan of his life. Such consideration would raise these questions: Did Milton allow politics to override his proposed dedication to poetry? Or did his sense of vocation manifest itself in every phase of his action and weld the rich and widely varied experiences of his life into a unified whole? If the world lost a loftier Lycidas, can it not be said to have gained a more sublime Paradise Lost?

Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to determine whether these critics have judged Milton fairly, or whether they have misinterpreted his motives. This involves three major problems: (1) to present evidence which supports the assumption that Milton did have a sense of vocation; (2) to draw from Milton's works sufficient indication that this sense of vocation was the controlling factor of his life; and (3) to determine whether his political activity, in the light of these findings, was a phase of divine service, and as such, contributed to the consummateness of his ultimate achievement, Paradise Lost.

Chapter One

The sense of vocation which persisted in the poet John Milton was the result of inherent and environmental influences, educational opportunities and associations, and the cultivation of his own aesthetic tastes. Little is known of his mother, Sarah Milton, except that she was a kindly woman and was known throughout the neighborhood for her charities. His father, a scrivener by profession, was a prosperous business man and a man of rather unusual culture. He has won recognition in his own right as a composer, and a series of his madrigals, The Triumphs of Oriana, which praised the beauty and prudence of the Virgin Queen, found its way into the best collections of music of the day.

The household of the Milton family enjoyed not only material prosperity, but some share of the liberal cultivation of the arts, especially music. The household was governed by a grave Puritanic piety which was the order in respectable homes of London of that time. Religious readings and exercises in devotion were daily practices of the family and serve to show the esteem in which such piety was regarded. Milton's father was of a serious disposition and seemed to regard religion as the chief concern in life. Such ideas were probably imparted to Milton consciously through family training and unconsciously through the effects of such an environment.

Young Milton was from the first the pride of his parents

and the object of their most diligent care. This may have been caused by his unusual precocity and exceptional physical beauty even as a very small boy. From his tenth year, he began to exhibit certain traits and tendencies which marked him as a child of more than ordinary abilities. It was then that his famous portrait as a child was painted. According to his brother, Christopher, he was already a poet. His verses were considered marvelous by the family circle, and Milton was henceforward brought up deliberately as a man of genius. The habit of looking upon himself as possessed of unusual talents dates back to his early childhood, and throughout his life he admits this, not boastingly, but as if it were a well known fact.

From the beginning there was a rare degree of sympathy and understanding between Milton and his father. Milton's father was thirty-seven years old when his son John was born, and when one becomes a parent at this age one is often susceptible to over-indulgence. In this case, the over-indulgence manifested itself in the extraordinary efforts of this father to provide the best of educational and cultural opportunities for this favored son. As a result, Milton enjoyed the signal advantage of growing up in a stimulating atmosphere, surrounded by the best of music, art, and literature. Unlike many youths of his day to whom culture was but a word before they passed to the University, Milton, as a part of his home life, had the benefit of broad interests and refinement as well as active encouragement toward study and literary pursuits.

An his personality developed, the characteristic mood and disposition of his mind gradually resolved into a deep and abiding seriousness. This seriousness seems to have been the result of the awakening of dormant tendencies inherited from his father which were urged gently on by the ideality of the cultural atmosphere. It is quite logical to assume that these lines from one of his later works, which the first engraver ventured to inscribe under the portrait already referred to as having been painted during Milton's tenth year, were really written by the poet with some reference to his own recollected childhood:

> When I was a child, no childish play
> To me was pleasing; all my mind was set
> Serious to learn and know, and thence to do
> What might be public good, myself I thought
> Born to that end, born to promote all truth,
> All righteous things[1]

Milton's father exhibited extreme sensitivity to the promise of genius revealed by his son. He set about providing for him the best training that he could afford. This tenure of training began with the engaging of Thomas Young, a promising young clergyman, as Milton's tutor. Their relationship seems to have been both pleasant and rewarding, for Milton pays tribute to Young in a later work and credits him with having first introduced him to the Greek and Latin classics. Young, who was afterwards the well-known Puritan leader, doubtlessly inspired his pupil with some of his own Puritan tendencies.

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1 Paradise Regained, Book I, l. 200-206.

During the same time that Thomas Young served him as tutor, Milton was attending St. Paul's School. One fact here which is of significance in the molding of the poet's character was that this school was dedicated to the Boy Jesus.[2] Monday prayers were designed to impress on students the episode of Christ in the temple. This adds emphasis to Milton's specification of his twelfth year as the beginning of a new seriousness:

> From my twelfth year, I hardly ever left my nocturnal studies before midnight.[3]

And in Paradise Regained, there is a passage thought by some biographers to be autobiographical[4] in which the same idea is expressed:

> Therefore, above my years,
> The law of God I read, and found it sweet;
> Made it my whole delight, and in it grew
> To such perfection that, ere yet my age
> Had measured twice six years, at our great Feast
> I went into the Temple, there to hear
> The teachers of our law, and to propose
> What might improve my knowledge or their own
> And was admired by all.[5]

So it is possible and probable that Milton may have found an analogy between his own promise and that of the

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2 James H. Hanford, Milton: Man and Statesman, p. 15.

3 Apology to Smectymnuus, Works, VIII.

4 Saurat and Masson have concluded that these lines are autobiographical.

5 Paradise Regained, l. 206-214.

Boy Jesus. Such exemplum, in all likelihood, produced dramatic results on a sensitive and able child like Milton.

The founder of St. Paul's School, John Colet, was one of the great Renaissance humanists of England. The course of study which he organized in collaboration with Erasmus and Lily, two other great humanists, was to include a renewed study of classical languages and literature and the study of early Christian writers. In addition to these humanities, Milton studied rhetoric and gained a command of Latin. The classical and Christian traditions influenced Milton later in his choice and treatment of subject matter; the mastery of rhetoric enabled him to control the thought which he communicated to the world; and the Latin training provided the medium of some of his most scholarly expressions.

The benefits of such excellent contacts and opportunities as Milton found to be his are not to be under-estimated, and yet there co-exists with all these a definite disadvantage which had a pronounced effect upon his conduct in life. The life he led even in childhood was sheltered and protected and did not admit of the ordinary associations of youth. It it true that there were children like him at school, but there he was a day student only and as such, missed the lesson of give-and-take that the experience of boarding-school offers. He attended St. Paul's by day, profited by the day's instruction and returned at night to his own sheltered niche in his father's household.

At sixteen, Milton was ready for college. Accordingly

his father sent him to Cambridge, and there he remained until he had taken two degrees. At Cambridge he acquired the nickname "The Lady of Christ's College," which was given him in derision by fellow students and which serves as an attestation of his virtuous conduct during his attendance at the University. The force of his character, however, and his superior intellectual ability won for him the genuine esteem of his seniors. The quality of seriousness which has been pointed out as the keynote of his character stood him in good stead at the University, for there it showed itself in a marked studiousness and a perseverance in graver occupations. His awareness of his own special abilities was evident during his University years according to an impression received by a contemporary biographer:

> That he, the said John Milton. . .was esteemed to be a virtuous and sober person, yet not to be ignorant of his own parts.[6]

It was only natural for a youth who showed such promise to have every advantage of education that his parents were able to afford. It was only natural, also, for such youths who enjoyed these advantages to prepare themselves for the Church or for the profession of law. The pious tone of Milton's family background would almost certainly mark him for the Church. He speaks years later, in The Reason of

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6 Anthony Wood, A Selection from Fasti Oxoniensis, (1691)

Church Government, of:

> . . .the Church to whose service by the intentions of my parents and friends I was destined as a child and in my own resolutions. . .[7]

But still later, in his Second Defense of the English People, he says:

> My father destined me while yet a little boy for the study of humane letters.[8]

These statements, written in retrospect, may be interpreted as agreeing in that both admit of the possibility of a career in the Church. If the latter expression is thought to diverge slightly from the first, then there is reasonable support for the belief that Milton's choice of a career of literature and letters was decided in his childhood. Whatever direction he chose to take, there is ample evidence that from an early age Milton received encouragement in his literary and intellectual ambitions from older persons.

History and the national background were not without a place in the foundation of Milton's life. He was born twenty years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, eight years before the death of Shakespeare, and in the sixth year of the reign of King James I. The political and ecclesiastical structure which the Tudors had built up had begun to show signs of weakening. A country on the verge of a civil

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7 The Reason of Church Government, (1642).

8 Second Defense of the English People, (1654).

war seemed hardly the place to nurture a genius of such sensitivity. But there was the Renaissance. Though, at his birth, its influence was on the decline, there remained enough of its power to inspire in Milton a love of learning, a worship for beauty, and an appreciation for the culture of the ages.

Into such an England, Milton was born and grew to manhood. Though the most powerful influences which shaped his personality and attitudes are to be found in parental endowment and his domestic background, this environment itself was reflected in the larger setting of his time. And as the boy Milton went about his daily routine amid the color and pageantry of London, he was beginning, perhaps unconsciously, that long apprenticeship to life which men serve who would be poets.

Chapter Two

Christopher Milton asserted, as has been stated, that his brother John was a poet at the age of ten years. The term poet as applied to him at this time meant, as it often does, merely a maker of verses. To Milton, whose whole life was dedicated to this type of literature, the term had a deeper meaning. The development of Milton's ideas regarding poetry deserves attention, for they clarify his belief in the necessity of complete dedication for supreme poetical achievement.

Of his boyhood verse, only two Psalm paraphrases seemed to him to possess sufficient merit to warrant preservation. These were published in 1645 in a volume to which was affixed a head note affirming that they were "Done by the Author at fifteen yeers old." These early poems are possessed of beauty and eloquence, though they are not original. According to Masson, scholars who have examined this verse have found in it strong evidences which suggest the influence of Spenser, Sylvester, Du Bartas, and Chaucer.[1] Milton's use of certain stereotyped rhymes and his choice of cadence suggest strongly his debt to these poets for his early inspiration.

It was at Cambridge in his nineteenth year that Milton revealed the nature of his interests. He, who had composed verse as a mere lad and who was gaining a command of the Latin and English languages, felt moved to issue a proclamation--

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1 David Masson, Life of Milton, Vol. 1, p. 96.

a proclamation designed to inform his friends as to what progress he had made and what he was contemplating. Such a proclamation Milton made in an English poem which he inserted in the midst of a Latin oration delivered before the College in the summer of 1628. The poem announced a plan of epic magnitude:

> I have some naked thoughts that rove about
> And loudly knock to have their passage out;
> And weary of their place do only stay
> Till thou hast decked them in thy best array;
> That so they may without suspect or fears
> Fly swiftly to this great assembly's ears;
> Yet had I rather if I were to choose
> Thy service in some graver subject use,
> Such as may make thee search thy coffers round,
> Before thou clothe thy fancy with fit sound.
> Such where the deep transported mind may soar,
> Above the wheeling poles, and at Heaven's door
> Look in and see each blissful deity.[2]

This poem is important for it revealed Milton's awareness of the divine impulse within him for which poetry is the natural outlet; and, it indicated his idea of the elevation of theme with which he felt this poetry must deal. Thus, he voiced a plan of achievement of majestic proportions while he was but a youth. These lines indicate the direction of Milton's thought, but they do not represent, as yet, a definite choice of a career.

The occupations and musings of his later University days, however, seem to point in the direction of a literary career. Milton gave evidence in his Prolusiones, especially the Seventh, that he had begun to meditate on fame, on an

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2 Vacation Exercise, l. 23-35. (July 19, 1628)

audience to which it was worthwhile to address himself, and on the need of preparation for such address. His Sixth Elegy indicated that he favored those poets of the highest order who sing of "wars and of heaven. . .and of the abysmal realms where barks a savage dog."[3]

In his Letter to a Friend, written during this time, Milton voiced some apology for his hesitancy in entering the Church. He calls it not an "endless delight in speculation" but a "sacred reverence and religious advisement" that delays him, "not taking thought of being late, so it give advantage to be more fit."[4] He allows the assumption to remain in the mind of his friend that when he is ready to render account for the talent which has been entrusted to him, it will be through the Church. But the whole tenor of this letter implies that his ambition is set toward something that the Church in its present condition cannot offer. There seems to lurk behind this deliberation the implication that his eyes are fixed on another purpose as yet unresolved.

The expressions of Milton's ~~later~~ college days are full of implications of his high regard for the estate of poetry, and of his belief in the divine sanction of the true poet:

> Truly the bard is sacred to the gods; he is their priest, and both his heart and lips mysteriously breathe the indwelling Jove.[5]

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3 Sixth Elegy, (December, 1629).

4 Letter to a Friend, (December, 1631).

5 Sixth Elegy.

He speaks, during this time, of the vineyard in which "Christ commandeth all to labor"; he tells of "that lot. . . toward which the will of Heaven leads him." In all, he speaks as one increasingly aware of a divine impulse within him which urges him to action. This impulse underlay his compelling thirst for knowledge:

> For who can contemplate and examine the ideal form of things, human and divine. . .unless he has a mind saturated and perfected by knowledge and training?[6]

Now he sought an outlet for this prophetic calling. By the time he left Cambridge, at twenty-four, it had become clear both to Milton and to his family that he could never submit his understanding to the trammels of Church laws and doctrine:

> It were sad for me if I should draw back. . . when all men offer their aid to help ease and lighten the difficult labors of the Church. . .till coming to some maturity of years and perceiving that tyranny had invaded the Church, that he who would take orders must subscribe slave, and take an oath withal, which unless he took with a conscience that would retch, I thought it better to prefer a blameless silence before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing.[7]

There is in Ad Patrem[8] a suggestion that Milton entertained some thought of a career in law, but this, too, seems to have been found not suitable to his purposes. There was

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6 Seventh Prolusion, (1631-32).

7 Reason of Church Government, (1642).

8 Ad Patrem was a Latin poem addressed to Milton's father.

only one other vocation toward which he had evinced an interest and that was poetry. And it was to poetry that he turned:

> It was found that whether aught was imposed on me by them that had the overlooking or betaken to of mine own choice in English or other tongue, prosing or versing, but chiefly this latter, the style, by certain vital signs it had, was likely to live.[9]

Thus, on the faith of the success of his Latin and English verse, Milton complied with his innate urge and acknowledged his dedication to the profession of authorship and especially to poetry.

When he completed his work at Cambridge and returned to his father's house, perhaps the first thing he did was to communicate his decision to his father. The elder Milton was advancing in years and certainly still nourishing the hope that this son, who had shown so much promise as a child, might distinguish himself either in the Church or in the profession of law. It is to be presumed from the implications in the Ad Patrem that the father showed some disappointment at his son's announcement, and that the son found it necessary to defend the vocation of his choice.

His father need not have been disappointed, however, for the vocation of poetry as it was interpreted by Milton was not inconsistent with the profession of the ministry. The son defended his chosen occupation; and his conviction of the divine call and the high utility of the poet served him to

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9 Reason of Church Government, Works, III.

good purpose in his defense. Verse-making was to him that lot toward which the will of Heaven has led him.[10] He had spoken of the poet as "sacred to the gods," and the gift the poet enjoys is the "inspired gift of God, rarely bestowed."[11] Of spontaneity and abandon, which were thought of as characteristic of the poetic nature, there is none; all is moral purpose, self-dedication, and divine justification. He tells his father:

> Scorn not the poet's song, a work divine, which more than aught else reveals our ethereal origin and heavenly race.[12]

Milton's idea of response to his calling was to withdraw from society to live the life of the scholarly recluse:

> If, by living modestly and temperately, we choose rather to tame the first impulses of fierce youth by reason and preserving constancy in study, preserving the heavenly vigour of the mind pure and untouched. . .we shall have a vaster and more glorious conquest than that of the globe.[13]

And he admits that "one who is almost wholly secluded and immersed in studies is readier to address the gods."[14] He has in mind a plan for his own achievement, and for his purposes no education is too prolonged nor is any delay

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10 Sonnet on his Twenty-third Birthday, (1631).

11 Reason of Church Government.

12 Ad Patrem, (1637).

13 Seventh Prolusion.

14 Ibid.

worth considering twice:

> It is more probable, therefore, that not the endless night of speculation, but this very consideration of that great commandment, does not press forward as soon may be to undergo, but keeps off with reverence and religious advisement how best to undergo, not taking thought of being late, so it gives advantage to be more fit.[15]

In further defense of his chosen vocation, he tells his father that by his devotion to the sister art of music, he should be the first to accept him as a sharer in the gifts of the divine Muses.[16]

Such was the essence of the argument as delivered to the ears of the father who first recognized and encouraged the ability of his son in the scholarly and artistic life. Milton's father was not the only one who was vexed with his decision. His friends thought this was a scheme of utter madness. It seemed to them that the most fruitful years of his life were being sacrificed. Diodati, the friend of his school years, remonstrated with him for his seriousness.

> But you, extraordinary man, why do you despise the gifts of nature? Why inexcusably persist in hanging over books and studies all day and all night? Live, laugh, make the most of youth and the hours. And cease studying the zeals and recreations and indolences of the wise men of old, wearing yourself out the while.[17]

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15 Letter to a Friend.

16 Ad Patrem.

17 Second Letter from Diodati to Milton, (Undated).

Other poets and men of letters, who produced their works with spontaneity, had set the pattern for the prevailing belief that those with creative abilities must plunge themselves into their work as early as possible. Milton had written several poems of spontaneous nature during his college days: viz., The Nativity Ode, On the Death of a Fair Infant, and The Passion. But, when he left Cambridge, he wrote that in an age of precocious maturities, "My own late spring no bud or blossom sheweth."[18] This indicated that he did not recognize anything that he had written as even the bud of what he intended to do in poetry.

It may be that Milton's father voiced some disapproval of this plan, but he did not force upon his son the choice of other professions which no doubt would have pleased the father more. Milton attests to this:

> Though you pretend to dislike the tender Muses, I think you do not really dislike them, for you did not, father, bid me go, where the opportunities for gain are easier and the golden hope of amassing riches shines steadily.[19]

Fortunately, the elder Milton showed his usual sympathy and understanding for his son's welfare and conceded amicably. This decision was of major importance in the poet's life. Had his father not agreed to his proposal and consented to furnish him with support during his period of apprenticeship

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18 Sonnet on his Twenty-third Birthday.

19 Ad Patrem.

then Milton would have had to provide for his own livelihood. This would have left little time for study and for the solitude required for contemplation. But this task did not fall to the poet's lot, for his father made possible the withdrawal to Horton where for five years, Milton enjoyed retirement and communion with nature and with books.

The poem Ad Patrem was Milton's expression of gratitude to the father who had made the realization of his dream possible. Most of all, Milton is grateful that his father did not fail him in his last request, which was to be the next and most important step in his plan. The years at Horton are to be the final phase of his conscious moral and intellectual architecture. The closing lines of the poem are a hymn of exultation in which Milton rejoices over the opportunity which lies before him. Now he need not be "lost in the obscurity of the stupid crowd." He is now become "one of the company of scholars" and may "take a seat in the midst of the ivy and laurel wreaths of the victors."

Chapter Three

It is evident, then, that by the time Milton left the University, he had determined on two things. For one, he had determined that he was to be not only a poet but a great poet, and for another, that in order to be a great poet, the most careful and elaborate preparation of the intellect and of the character was essential. He felt himself called to divine service, and his medium of expression was to be poetry. This belief is manifested again and again throughout Milton's life; it is the guiding-star that shines clear and steadfast through every phase of his action and his thought.

Once Milton had dedicated himself to poetry, he laid out his plan. Carefully and deliberately, he designed his life as though he had an eternity before him. Few men in any profession ever deliberately set for themselves such a plan and ever labored more diligently to qualify themselves for a vocation. At the point where others complete their education, Milton began his. College seemed but the prelude; the real study was to come in the quiet of meditative solitude:

> I have experienced nothing more nutritive to my genius and conservative of its good health. . . than a learned and liberal leisure.[1]

For this purpose, Milton withdrew with his father to the little village of Horton. Here the unbroken solitude

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1 Letter to a Friend.

and tranquillity of environment provided the ideal atmosphere for poetical meditation. In Horton, Milton spent five years and eight months. During this time, he read and meditated, freed from the restraints and obligations of society. The withdrawal of the young poet to this life indicated that he had come to the full realization of his calling as a poet and had set himself to the purpose of acquiring the necessary preliminary training. As his was a character most notably devoid of hypocrisy, the personal account he gives in his letters, pamphlets, and other of his writings is the more valuable in the delineation of his plan. Especially is this true of The Reason of Church Government and The Second Defense of of the English People, two pamphlets written in later years which furnish much of the autobiography of this period.

The fact that he withdrew so completely from society may suggest to some observers an ideality of temperament which would make solitude agreeable to such an unusual personality. But Milton is careful to explain that "studious retirement" is not dreaming; it is partly a form of self-sacrifice for there is against it "a much more potent and inbred inclination which about this time of a man's life solicits most--the desire of a home and family of his own."[2] Milton was no demi-god, but a human being who had the emotional make-up of any normal young man of his age. But in spite of these emotional stirrings he had, also, the courage to follow the dictates of his reason.

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2 Letter to a Friend.

At Horton, Milton spent his time in intellectual pursuits which followed a plan of his own choosing. "On my father's estate," he says, "I enjoyed an interval of uninterrupted leisure, which I entirely devoted to the study of Greek and Latin authors."[3] It says much for the poet that he was sustained through this period by the hope of an accomplishment worthy of immortality. He confided this to his friend, Diodati, perhaps in reply to an interrogation:

> You make inquiries as to what I am about? What am I thinking of? Why, with God's help of immortality! Forgive the words, I only whisper it in your ear. Yes, I am pluming my wings for a flight.[4]

These few lines give but a hint of the task that the poet had undertaken. For some poets, Milton felt it would be no disqualification to be inspired by Venus or Bacchus. But for such as he aspired to be, it was different:

> The poet who sings. . .of heaven. . .that poet should live sparingly and should find in herbs his simple food. Let him drink only sober draughts from a pure spring. Let him have in addition, a youth chaste and free from evil, uncompromising standards, and stainless hands.[5]

It was Milton's ambition to be a poet of this order, not merely a poeta (maker of verses) but a vates (an inspired singer or prophet). Such words, voicing these high ideals

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3 Second Defense of the English People.

4 Letter to Diodati, (September, 1637).

5 Sixth Elegy.

quite befit the Milton who was referred to as the "Lady of Christ's College" because of his virtuous conduct.

Learning is the means by which the poet prepares himself, Milton believed, for:

> The end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright and out of this knowledge to love him, to imitate him as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue which being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection.[6]

Love of learning, then, is no idle curiosity, no empty chase of shadows and notions, but a very definite means to action and to the pursuit of the "solid good flowing from due and timely obedience to that command in the gospel."[7]

Milton speaks ~~further~~ in ~~other~~ of his writings of the poet as being possessed of knowledge, virtue, and religion. He must cherish a "pure mind in a pure body." His soul should contain the "perfect shape." To this is added "industrious and select reading, steady observation, and insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs."[8]

As regards poetry, Milton believed that poems raised "from the heat of youth or vapours of wine," such from the pen of "ignorant poetasters who, having scarce ever heard of that which is the main consistance of a true poem," were

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6 Of Education, Works IV.

7 Letter to a Friend.

8 Reason of Church Government.

in his eyes treachery to the poet's high vocation. The poet is to be a kind of teacher, divinely inspired, for his people:

> These abilities of the poet are the inspired gift of God; and are of power beside the office of a pulpit to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and public civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind. . .to celebrate in glorious and lofty hymns the throne and equipage of God's almightiness.[9]

Hence, the sacredness of the poet's office will permit only of that poetry which is the result of a rounded circle of study enriched by contemplation of things divine. Only in this manner can a poet produce a work worthy of his high calling.

The fact that Milton did not suppress his own early poetry but deliberately perpetuated it does not indicate any failure in judgment or any wavering in his requirements of perfection. From the first he is as rigorous with his poetry as he is with the conduct of his own life. He knew the measure of his progress with almost unerring sureness. To the Passion, a poem of his early years, he had affixed a headnote explaining that the work was unfinished because the subject was "beyond the yeers that the Author had" and later at Horton, he informed Diodati that "my Pegasus has not yet enough feathers to soar aloft in the fields of air." The industrious leisure of his youth, the dreams of great accom-

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9 Reason of Church Government.

plishments, and his early attempts at verse were regarded by Milton as "the delightful intermissions which lent variety to the hours spent in mental discipline and in the continual plodding without which no great good can be done."[10]

Out of the depth of this knowledge, meditation, and contemplation, the character Milton sought to ennoble began to emerge. It was not long after when he expressed the confirmed opinion that:

> He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true Poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things, not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men or famous cities unless he have in himself the experience and practice of all that which is praiseworthy.[11]

Like all men of orderly mind, Milton recognized the importance of motive and of persistence and steadfastness of purpose. There must be no doubt, no turning back. The eccentricity commonly associated with genius and its products had no place in his plan. One must persevere though he perish in the attempt. To be a true poet, a man must live the good life.

So unwavering and relentless was Milton in his beliefs that Masson concludes that the preconceived notion of poetic character applied to him would, if true to theory, reveal him to be basically too solid and too immovable, with aims

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10 Tetrachordon, Works, IV.

11 Reason of Church Government.

too fixed and firm to permit that he should have been a poet at all.[12] His virtues and what some may deem his faults stem from the intensity of his devotion to high ideals. From such intensity of devotion there evolves an egoism which serves as a natural expression of his intellectual capabilities. Lack of such egoism would have diminished the passions and resolves which serve to inspire his purpose. Chosen of God as he believed himself to be, he conducts himself as one whose projects and beliefs are underwritten by divine approval. In the light of his noble egoism, he interprets all misfortunes which befall him in life as evidences of God trying the faith of his elect servant:

> This three years day these eys, though clear
> To outward view, of blemish or of spot;
> Bereft of light thir seeing have forgot,
> Nor to thir idle orbs doth sight appear. . .
> Yet I argue not
> Against heavns hand or will, nor bate a jot
> Of heart or hope;[13]

And the Second Defense echoes the same conviction of divine favoritism:

> And, indeed, in my blindness, I enjoy in no inconsiderable degree the favor of the Deity, who regards me with more tenderness and compassion in proportion as I am able to behold nothing but Himself.[14]

The years at Horton were crowned by the final touch

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12 Masson, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 312.

13 Sonnet to Cyriack Skinner.

14 Second Defense of the English People.

to his preparation for his career--his trip abroad. He was perhaps the last Englishman to go abroad, after the fashion of his day, in the spirit of the early Renaissance--that is with dignity and purposefulness.[15] On his tour of the Continent, he courted the higher types of experiences, seeking out distinguished scholars with whom he might exchange culture--communicating his own, observing and appraising theirs. He suggested this idea of liberal study through travel in the Third Prolusion:

> To study all the countries of the world and to visit them, to scan the places trodden by heroes of old, to traverse to the regions glorified in the tales of the famous poets. . .next, to observe the manners of men and the national governments that have been fairly ordered and thence to investigate the nature of all living things.[16]

The experience did much to confirm Milton's own sense of belonging to that aristocracy of the intellectually elite who maintained their sphere of influence against the stress of matters of less exalted interest. There is to be noted a strengthening of the poet's belief in his own literary capacity and a new impetus of ambition resulting from the encouragement of his continental friends, who received his compositions with so much enthusiasm that:

> I began thus to assent both to them and divers of my friends here at home--that I might perhaps leave something so written to after times, as they

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15 Hanford, op. cit., p. 39.

16 Third Prolusion.

should not willingly let it die.[17]

Milton was handsome, brilliant, of more than modest means, and much sought after. It might have been expected that he was tempted, while abroad, to pursue the follies of youth. But, as the passage from the Third Prolusion suggests, he went abroad primarily as a poet, susceptible to new impressions from which to draw later inspirations. He returned with renewed confidence in his own ambitions and with a sense of sanction for the chastity which served him in good stead. These are his words:

> In all places in which vice meets with so little shame, I never once deviated from the paths of integrity and virtue, and perpetually reflected that though my conduct might escape notice of men, it could not elude inspection of God.[18]

When Milton returned to England in the summer of 1639, it was with the idea that his period of preparation was over. His character as a poet and as a man had been painstakingly developed in accord with the standards that he had set for himself. The sense of vocation which inspired his plan of development had resolved his life and his desired achievement into one inseparable unit. The factors and experiences which prepared him to execute his great work, prepared him, also, for manhood.

The Milton who emerged from the Horton period and from

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17 Second Defense of the English People.

18 Ibid.

the foreign journey had yet to try his wings. He had plumed them but he had not used them for flight. He was a man of virtue, temperance, chastity, firmness of purpose, ambition, reverence, and intellect. These things have been revealed. As yet there is only indirect evidence of the force which his sense of vocation exerted on his actions and expressions. It is there in his personality, but it has yet to assert itself. When he lifts his voice, shall it not be said that his words were inspired by his sense of divine service?

These facts, if borne in mind, will make more comprehensible the next and perhaps most controversial phase of Milton's career. Justification of this phase can be attempted only through careful analysis of the motives which prompted it. To be deserving of a place in the perfect structure of Milton's life, it must show itself to be inspired by this same sense of divine service.

Chapter Four

Milton curtailed his foreign journey because of the threatening state of home politics and because:

> I thought it base to be traveling for amusement abroad while my fellow citizens were fighting for liberty at home.[1]

He had been absent from England for eighteen months, and during this time the aspect of public affairs had grown ominous. The issues of the controversy were so pervasive that it was almost impossible for any educated man who understood them not to range himself on a side. So Milton rushed back to England, presumably to engage in the struggle.

Once back in England, however, he did not plunge into the fray. In fact over a year and a half elapsed before he made his first gesture of public service. During this time, he had secured for himself a house and had engaged in "literary pursuits" while:

> I calmly awaited the issue of the contest, which I trusted to the wise conduct of Providence and the courage of the English people.[2]

That these "literary pursuits" concerned the projected plan of his great epic, is confirmed by a manuscript at Trinity College in Milton's own handwriting, which shows his activity during these years on the design of his con-

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1 Second Defense of the English People.

2 Ibid.

templated work.

The end of this period found Milton engrossed in the political situation which had called him back from his travels. He entered the struggle thinking, no doubt, that his part could be played in a few years. He could not have foreseen that having once declared himself, there would be no turning back for the next twenty years. All his powers were about to be tested in furious action, in real experience.

There existed in England at this time two great parties which had divided the country, the Puritan party which had been developing since the time of Elizabeth, and the party of the King (and the Bishops). The party of the King leaned toward the Catholic ideal and insisted that ecclestical discipline was the essence of religion and that the basis of the Church was the apostolic succession. The Puritans felt that they could not exist in safety, side by side with a church whose principles were based on apostolic succession. The Puritan ideal, based on domination of soul over flesh, the mastery of one's self and justice in public life, seems to have represented a generous vision that attracted some England's noblest minds. Even the most moderate men who professed satisfaction with the progress made by the reform movement trembled at its insecurity. But the sublime hope of the great Puritan party was to suppress what they felt to be tyranny, both political and ecclestical, and to conduct their country on a rational basis in harmony with the will of God.

Milton, as one of the country's noblest minds, shared the hope of the Puritans. He found in the Puritan cause many of the things in which he believed. He felt in himself a great power that was to weigh heavily in the destiny of the Church and of the country; and he felt that he was capable of real and decisive action. Besides his high idea of himself, he has a high idea of the English people. They are, he believed, chosen of God to defend truth:

> The pleasing pursuit of these thoughts hath oftentimes led me into a serious question with myself, how it should come to pass that England (having had the grace and honour from God, to be the first that should set up a standard for the recovery of lost truth, and blow the first evangelic trumpet to the nations. . .) should not be last and most unsettled in the enjoyment of that peace. . .yet methinks the precedence which God gave this island, to be first restorer of buried truth, should have been followed with more success.[3]

But this is not the first time that God has shown special favor toward the English people:

> Now once again by all concurrence of signs. . . God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in his church, what does he then, but reveal himself to his servants, and as his manner is, first to his Englishmen.[4]

It seemed then, that the will of God was that truth should be restored to earth and this task had been delegated to the English people. Milton, who believed himself chosen of God to execute a divine mission on earth, found it his

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3 Of Reformation, Works, II.

4 Ibid.

unique privilege to advance God's cause on behalf of His chosen people.

The response was more than willingness, it was urgency. It is one thing to cherish a purpose born, in part, of one's own consciousness of more than ordinary powers. It is another to be touched with the fire that makes, for good or ill, with or against one's will, a prophet, burdened with a message to be delivered, cost what it may:

> But when God commands to take the trumpet, and blow a dolorous or a jarring blast, it lies not in man's will what he shall say or what he shall conceal. If he shall think to be silent because of the reproach and derision he met with daily. . .he would be forc't to confess as Jeremiah confest, 'His word was weary in my heart, as a burning fire in my bones.' I was weary with forbearing and could not stay.[5]

Milton could not, then, have desisted in political participation, for his Master commanded him to speak, and he was left no choice.

In his political writings, Milton defended the liberties of Englishmen. "I perceived," he said, "that there were three species of liberty which are essential to the happiness of social life--religious, domestic, and civil."[6] Virtue he held to be the only source of political and individual freedom, for liberty "hath a sharp and double-edge fit only to be handled by just and virtuous men."[7] His attacks were

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5 Reason of Church Government.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

directed less against particular abuses than against the deep-seated errors on which almost all these abuses were founded--a servile worship of men in high places who lacked the necessary virtue and against the irrational dread of innovation.

With regard to religious liberty, Milton seemed to feel that his chief concern lay in that direction:

> I saw that a way was opening for the establishment of real liberty; that the foundation was laying for the deliverance of mankind from the yoke of slavery. . .I perceived that if I ever wished to be of use, I ought at least not to be wanting to my country, to the church, and to so many of my fellow Christians in a crisis of so much danger.[8]

He attacks the prelates in the Reason of Church Government, charging them with being instruments of tyranny and with using the Gospel as a weapon against liberty. In the defense of civil liberty Milton wrote his famed Areopagitica to urge the necessity of the freedom of the press. Domestic liberty he advocated in a series of pamphlets setting forth the need for new laws on divorce. In the course of his public service, Milton found occasion to defend all of the liberties which he held as essential to the happiness of social life. In his writings, and in his service for the Commonwealth, he adhered to his dedicated purpose of carrying forward the work of liberation.

In his years of public service, Milton heard the arguments

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8 Reason of Church Government.

in Council and knew the speeches of ambassadors. He saw noble intentions corrupted through ambition and he saw other evidences of the struggle between good and evil in man. He, who had lived the life apart, learned his lesson of life and of human nature, gained an insight into man's motives and emotions, and grasped an insight into the broader issues of the human struggle--all of which could be imparted only through commerce with the world. The years in political life might have destroyed a weaker man, and the failure of marriage might have disillusioned him. Rather, such adversities seemed to strengthen Milton. His metal received from the shock of public contact the temper it seemed to need. Active service inured the will of the idealist.

Milton's defense of liberty had been heard throughout the world. He had extolled the cause of justice and right in all the places where men were lovers of liberty. His voice had thundered through the realms in prose as lyrical and moving as music, never letting the world forget that he was first a poet, then a patriot, but above all a workman in the service of God:

> If the writer now for haste snatches up a plain ungarnished present for so many late deliverances, the time will come when God has settled peace in the Church and righteous judgment in the kingdom and then the poet will take up a harp, and sing thee an elaborate Song to generations.[9]

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9 Animadversions, Works, III.

He who had propagated truth was rewarded with the ennoblement of character which expanded him to the stature necessary for the epic poet. The mighty deeds that he had witnessed, with God's help, he is to dignify. The experiences through which he had passed added the qualities which he needed.

In various passages of his writings, Milton had listed certain qualities which he considered as prerequisites of the epic poet. These qualities were in addition to those which he had already acquired in his preparation for the vocation of poetry--qualities which the secluded life did not provide. In one instance, he is careful to specify as a necessary of the ideal poet, "an insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs." And in another he suggests that a poet should be:

> A composition of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men, or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experiences and practices of all that is praiseworthy.[10]

The epic poet, then, must have experience and practice, and an insight into all seemly arts and affairs. These were the attributes which only the give-and-take of life could add; they were the elements of character that came only from the maturity of a useful and fruitful life. Without them, Milton did not feel worthy or able to execute his great work. That he was fully aware of this, he assured his readers:

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10 An Apology for Smectymnuus.

> Neither do I think it shame to covenant with any knowing reader that for some few years yet, I may go on trust with him toward the payment of what I am now indebted as being a work not to be raised from the heat of youth.[11]

And for this reason, Milton went "on trust" for many years in defense of political and religious ideals which were to him most "praiseworthy."

For Milton, there was no decision to be made regarding this step. His sense of divine service had so completely unified his life and his purpose that they functioned as a single unit. He did not turn away from poetry into political service; but in the light of this controlling impulse, the defense of liberty became a phase of divine service. He had performed the service which was most urgent and to which the command of God first led him. The political pamphlets did not represent his choice of a medium:

> I should not choose this manner of writing, wherein knowing myself inferior to another task, I have the use, as I may account, but of my left hand.[12]

But when this service is done and the cause successfully defended, then Milton feels that God will reward him by inspiring him to sing his "hymn to generations."

So completely was Milton's life a perfect entity, and so wholly had his character merged with his purpose, that

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11 Reason of Church Government, (1642).

12 Ibid.

the things that prepared him for one prepared him for the other. From public service he gained a knowledge of the mutability of human nature and of the devious ways into which justice and right are often forced by men. This knowledge fortified him so that he was able to bear nobly the misfortunes of life which fell to his lot. This same knowledge reinforced him and strengthened his style to suit the greatness of his conception. It had occurred to Milton that he would not be capable of his great epic until this unity of character and purpose had been achieved:

> And it was not long after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem.[13]

Public service had been the test--the necessary test for his ideas and for his character. From it Milton emerged victorious, prepared to reap the harvest of his labors.

From the struggles in which he vindicated human liberty, Milton turned not back to poetry but forward, a character forged into the perfect moral and poetical structure and raised to the dignity of his address. Out of the chaos of memories, of imaginings, of pensive thoughts on present events, there formed the outline of his epic with his hero shaped on God Himself. He dared to justify the ways of God to man, and who is worthier to perform the task than one who labors by divine appointment, has kept the faith,

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13 An Apology for Smectymnuus.

and who has been rewarded with divine inspiration?

> And chiefly Thou, O Spirit, who dost prefer
> Before all temples, the upright heart and pure,
> Instruct me for Thou knows't; Thou from the first
> Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread
> Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
> And mad'st it pregnant:[14]

In admonition, Milton turned to the English people bidding them persevere in the state of liberty which they had achieved:

> If after such display of courage and vigor, you relinquish the path of virtue, if you do anything unworthy of yourselves, posterity will sit in judgment on your conduct.[15]

Milton had fulfilled the function in a manner worthy of God's sanction. He stands now ready to interpret for the world the deeper vision of spiritual truth which is to be the climax of his labors in the Master's vineyard.

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14 Paradise Lost, Book I, l. 17-22.

15 Areopagitica, (1644).

Chapter Five

The Restoration of 1660, occasioning the sudden inversion of the positions of the two parties in the English nation, brought about much individual hardship. The heroic age of England passed away with the downfall of the Protectorate whose cause Milton had defended. But such were the fortunes of war, the necessary consequences of party ascendancy. The political change had an obvious effect on the life and fortunes of the poet, John Milton.

As a partisan, he was necessarily involved in the downfall of his party. He lost, first of all, his Latin Secretaryship. And for a while, he was in danger of losing his life as well. But the personal danger, the loss of his savings, and even the loss of his sight were far outweighed by the shock which his moral nature felt from the loss of all the hopes and aspirations which had nourished his soul. It was not merely the defeat of his party; it was the wreck of the principles and ideals for which Milton had fought so zealously for more than twenty years. Others might compensate their losses by transferring their services and their loyalties to the restored monarch, but not Milton. He had embarked on the Puritan cause not only from intellectual convictions but with all the passion and force of his nature. The cause he served had engaged his whole personality, for the beliefs he defended were a part of the pattern of his life. It was inconceivable that he could accommodate

himself to the new era or compromise with the cause now in power. He took the only course open to him, turned his thoughts away from the political disaster, turned them again to the Muse who had his first allegiance.

It was in this moment of overthrow that Milton became truly great. He stood alone in the face of defeat in the causes upon which he had staked his all. Everything he had fought for and hoped for was destroyed. The king had returned. The bishops were restored. Moral excellence had become a jest. His theories of education and divorce were treated with scorn, and even the press was overwhelmed by a new censorship.

Amid this general destruction of the things he held as worthy and sacred, Milton drew himself up in lonely majesty and poured forth his great soul in a supreme monument to his genius. This Milton, blind, gout-ridden, and berated by his enemies, freed his soul from the shackles of life by daring to sing of immortality.

There is a certain heroic magnitude in this action. Twenty years before, he had put aside his literary pursuits with this promise:

> When God has sattled. . .righteous judgment in the kingdom. . .then the poet will take up a harp and sing thee an elaborate hymn to generations.[1]

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1 Animadversions, (July, 1641).

Resolutely, he had postponed his poetic ambitions to serve what he believed to be the more urgent call. He had weathered adversity and trial which had sobered his faith but had not broken his spirit. The sternness which gave him the courage to face defeat developed the final phase of his character. From that struggle which was so bitter to his heart he drew the very substance of Paradise Lost. The sublimity of this work is directly traceable to the quality of the soul which gave it origin.

Milton had conceived his poem at the age of thirty-two, and his ripened judgment at fifty only approved a selection made in earlier days--days of bright hope. He chose to treat a Biblical subject, for he sought a combination of ideas which no other subject could offer. So from the book of Genesis he took the narrative of the Fall of Man and proceeded after his own fashion to write his epic. To write on a scheme so grandiose was to recall all the activity of his life: Italy, the solitude of Horton, his hasty and ill-fated marriage, his life's contention for liberty. In a new medium and with a deepened conviction, Milton worked still for the future.

Just as Virgil in his story of Aeneas was able to embody the past and future greatness of Rome, so Milton, basing his work on a few verses of Genesis and incorporating in it the vast resources of his learning, his taste, and his experiences, also created a myth characteristic of the

English nation. He committed his ideas on trifold liberty, religious, civil, and domestic, to a medium best fitted for their preservation. Here they would remain for all ages. Time could not take away their power nor mar their luster. He had used the Scriptures to sustain his political arguments. Now he used them to convey those conceptions of his own which seemed to merit immortality.

Paradise Lost did not depend only on its moral purpose for its fame, for it has other qualities of grandeur, any one of which may have secured for it a place among the immortals. The greatness of the conceived idea is deserving of comment. Milton sang of Lucifer's adventures in ambition and of Lucifer's great fall. He walked with Adam in the Garden of Eden and he heard the angel Gabriel narrate the Creation. He told of the great battle of the Empyrean where mountains were hurled at erring angels. He probed the horrors of Hell; winged the uncharted deep by Satan's side; and, ventured, finally to the throne of God. In all this, Milton has grasped the very essence of human thought. The poet's transcendant flight into the realm of supreme poetic beauty gives the work a quality of excellence which conforms to the highest standards to which man can aspire. There were men in England, at that time, who hungered for just such dignity of thought and nobility of phrase. It was to this audience, "fit though few," that Milton chose to address himself.

In setting about to compose Paradise Lost, Milton regarded himself not as an author but as a medium, the mouth-piece of "that Eternal Spirit who can enrich all utterance and all knowledge." He equals himself with:

> Blind Thamyris and blind Maenides,
> And Teresias and Phineas, prophets old.[2]

As he equals them in misfortune - blindness - he would rival them in function. As a prophet he is to utter God's truth which shall pass his lips--lips which have been hallowed by the touch of sacred fire.

Paradise Lost combined the opposite virtues of two distinct periods of Milton's development--the daring imagination and fresh emotional play of early manhood with the exercised judgment and chastened taste of ripened years. Such a sublimity as he achieved could have proceeded only from a mind and character that had something of true nobility. The word "Miltonic" has come to be synonymous with sublimity. It is such a sublimity which in Paradise Lost bears the reader aloft on wings of music which seems to emanate from the fabled celestial spheres. No responding chord of the intellect, moral or aesthetic, remains untouched. To the nature endowed with the true receptive gift, it will command an appreciation as one of the rare works of human genius whose beauty and power is inexhaustible.

To read Paradise Lost, then, is to realize how Milton

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2 Paradise Lost, Book III, l. 35-36.

imposed a majestic order on the tumultuous confusion of human speech and knowledge. To read its author's life is to realize how a strong man's will moulded a world of adverse circumstances so that affliction and defeat are made the very instruments by which he became that which he had, from the beginning, chosen for himself to be. The courage and tenacity of purpose with which he undertook his great work in spite of all that beset him will always command the admiration and respect of mankind.

Milton was aware that he had fulfilled his purpose and had justified his talent--the gift of a kind and generous Maker. Few of his contemporaries, with the possible exception of Dryden, were able to sufficiently divorce party sentiment from literary taste so as to accord the poem its full measure of acclaim. But Milton knew that he had touched a lofty peak beyond the reach of ordinary men. He had kept himself pure and had made of his life a poem. As a result, the celestial powers had revealed to him things invisible to the sight of ordinary mortals. He had carried the banner of truth, and he had kept faith with himself and with his vocation. Now with a majestic sigh, he presents his case to his Creator with the satisfaction of one who emerges from battle the victor:

> Servant of God, well done, well hast thou fought
> The better fight, who singly has maintained
> Against revolted multitudes the Cause
> Of Truth, in word mightier than they in arms;
> And for the testimonies of Truth hast borne

Universal reproach, far worse to beare
Then violence: for this was all thy care
To stand approv'd in sight of God, though Worlds
Judg'd thee perverse.[3]

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3 Paradise Lost, Book VI, l. 29-36.

Summary

It was, indeed, a bent of nature with roots drawing from a deeper stratum of character than any act of reasoned will which fixed and sustained Milton's purpose. This deeper stratum of character was his belief in the high mission and purpose which he considered his by sacred endowment. Through the influence of this belief, he was able to set up the standards of morality and culture which he thought becoming to a great poet, and then to proceed, deliberately and conclusively, to attain them. That he had such notions of lofty achievement is not worthy of particular mention, for many have dreamed dreams; but that he regulated his life so that every step led to the ultimate goal of high accomplishment and that he succeeded in the fulfillment of his fondest ambitions makes worthwhile an analysis of the sense of vocation which furnished the motive for his actions.

The outstanding feature of this great life was the unity of purpose. Though Milton's literary works fall into three periods--his early poems, his prose works, and his later poems--his purpose was constant and the events of his life connect and explain the change from one period to another. What distinguishes Milton from the crowd of young ambition is the constancy of this resolve. He not only nourished it through manhood, this dream of his youth, keeping it under the most importunate circumstances which often carry off

most ambitions into the pursuit of place, profit, and honor, but he carried out his dream in its integrity in old age. He formed himself for this accomplishment and no other. Study at home, travel abroad, political service, public service, the practice of the domestic virtues, were all so many phases of the divine manifestation which culminated in the execution of Paradise Lost. His life was as a stately and imposing structure, nobly planned from the beginning and nobly executed to the last harmonious detail of the original design. His character was almost completely without blemish, his aspirations pure and lofty, his courage undaunted, and his intellectual vigor and power almost without parallel. Wordsworth has spoken truly of him:

> Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
> Thy hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
> Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
> So didst thou travel on life's common way
> In cheerful godliness.[1]

Like his own Paradise Lost, he appears in titanic proportions and independent loneliness as the most impressive figure in English Literature. He is called by some the sublimest poet of all times. And Dryden, who lived in his shadow, has furnished his tomb with a fitting epitaph:

> Three poets, in three distant ages born,
> Greece, Italy, and England did adorn.
> The first in loftiness of thought surpassed;
> The next in majesty; in both the last.
> The force of nature could no further go:
> To make a third, she joined the other two.

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1 William Wordsworth, Milton, Thou Shouldest Be Living At This Hour, l. 9-13.

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