

# THE LATIN POEMS OF JOHN MILTON<sup>1</sup>

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THE Latin poems of John Milton are almost entirely the product of his earlier years, from 1625 when at the age of sixteen he went as an undergraduate to Christ's College, Cambridge, down to 1639 when he returned to England after his stay in Italy. The poems consist of some fairly long, and some very short, pieces in elegiac couplets, amounting to 720 verses in all; of five solid poems in hexameters amounting to 634 verses; and there are also three poems of moderate length—one in alcaics, one in iambics, and one in sczontes, the limping iambic metre (which in Milton's treatment shows signs of excessive claudication).<sup>2</sup> They were first published in 1645, in a small octavo volume (now very rare) containing the "Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin, composed at several times", in other words, his English and Latin poems up to that date. In this short study I cannot hope to deal with all the Latin poems: so I shall confine myself to those which are mainly autobiographical, though I shall hope to touch on one or two others which show the development of his poetic talent or are marked by other features of special interest. I have perhaps moved a rather long way from my legitimate province of Classical Latin literature: but in the course of some desultory reading last summer, it happened that I came upon these poems; and as they seemed to be attractive in themselves, and written to an excellent standard of Classical Latin, and as they gave me pleasure, I thought they might be made the subject of a paper like this. Certainly, they present a portrayal of the young Milton very different from the austere character that belongs to his later life.

Milton had been educated first by a private tutor, Thomas Young (who later became Chaplain to the English merchants in

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Milton's metres, see *Classical Review*, April 1887, pp. 46-48.

Hamburg and to whom Milton addresses his fourth Elegy in terms of the most affectionate admiration), and then at St. Paul's School, London, from which he proceeded as a *pensionarius minor* (a student paying for board and education) to Christ's College, Cambridge in the Lent Term of the session 1624-5 when he had just entered on his seventeenth year. He must have been exceedingly well taught in the Classics, for his command of Latin vocabulary, of Latin idiom, of Latin turns of phrase, of the hexameter and elegiac metres, and of mythology, is extraordinarily competent and masterful—to judge by the poems he began to write, partly as academic exercises, partly as genuine pieces of self-expression, soon after his admission to the University. But he appears never to have been an easy-going or docile undergraduate : there was in him a haughty temper of self-determination that rebelled against the normal processes of academic discipline : for even at that early age he wished strongly to go his own way—to read widely in whatever field of literature he chose, to meditate upon what he had read, to try his hand at original composition, to follow the leadings of his mind, and to prepare himself to obey some inner sense of poetic vocation. In him, as in other great men, predestination and personal will were one and the same thing : and, as he became more and more aware of his true calling, so he revolted against the educational system, against the tutor who embodied that system, against academic pressures towards conformity ; and, from the point of view of an academic teacher, I fear he was just an impossible young man. So it is not surprising that, apparently in the Lent Term of 1625-6, his second year, he had some kind of disagreement or quarrel with his tutor and brought upon himself the appropriate academic sanction : he was rusticated. In fact, he returned later in that session, was placed under a different tutor, and remained in the University for the customary seven years, taking his B.A. in 1628 and his M.A. in 1632. The first poem upon which I shall touch is a letter to his great friend Charles Diodati, written from his father's house in London during the period of rustication.

This friend, with the very unEnglish name of Diodati, came of a distinguished Italian family whose original home had been in Lucca in Tuscany ; but for religious reasons the grandfather

had taken the family to Geneva, and the father had later settled in England where he practised medicine. Their son, Charles Diodati, who figures largely in these Latin poems, had been born in England, and had been with Milton at St. Paul's School and had then passed to Trinity College, Oxford where he graduated B.A. in 1625 and M.A. in 1628. After primary graduation he appears to have been preparing to take up the study of medicine, his father's profession, and for some reason to have been staying in North West England near Chester. Until his death in 1638 he was Milton's closest friend—*dimidium animae* Milton calls him, a kindred spirit who had the sympathetic understanding and the literary education to be the companion and critic of our poet.

It is in just this tone of personal friendship that Milton writes his first elegy in reply to a letter from Charles Diodati then residing in Cheshire, and he expresses his great pleasure at hearing from a comrade so far separated in location and yet continuing ever to be *pectus amans nostri tamque fidele caput*. He explains that he is in London, his native city, and very glad to be there. He has no interest in returning again to Cambridge or to the College from which he has been excluded; for Cambridge is a bleak place, a place of bare treeless fields, and not in any way conducive to poetry or congenial to the poetic temperament—*quam male Phoebicolis convenit ille locus!* Nor has he any wish to put up with the threats of a hectoring tutor or with the punitive measures which are galling to an independent spirit. "If this is banishment from the University", he says, "if this is rustication—to retire to my father's house and, free from worry, to live in pleasant leisure, then I do not reject either the name or condition of an exile." The whole tone of the passage suggests that the feelings and needs of such a wayward poet had not been understood at Cambridge and that he could not be shaped to a normal academic pattern. But at his father's house in London he can give himself freely and without interference to poetry and to literature, which are his true life:

tempora nam licet hic placidis dare libera Musis  
et totum rapiunt me mea vita libri.

And when he is tired of study he goes for refreshment to the theatre, to see comedy (which he describes in all the types of

character familiar in Plautus and Terence) or to see Tragedy, as it were Senecan Tragedy, *furiosa Tragoedia*, brandishing her bloodstained sceptre and shaking her wildly streaming hair—whereat the young spectator confesses to the appropriate blend of pain and pleasure :

et dolet et specto, iuvat et spectasse dolendo ;  
interdum et lacrimis dulcis amaror inest.

But it is spring in this year of his rustication and he enjoys the deliciousness of the season : he does not stay indoors all the time nor in the city all the time ; he sallies forth into some park-land planted with elm-trees, and here he sees visions of beauty that stir his young and susceptible heart. But let him speak for himself : “ Here one may often see companies of girls passing on their way, each of them fair as a star, radiating alluring flames. Ah ! how often have I stood amazed at the entrancing beauty of their lovely form, a beauty that might put new life into a decrepit Jupiter. Ah ! how often have I seen those eyes that surpass the brightness of jewels . . . ”, and he goes on to a more specific, but always modest, inventory of their charms—necks of ivory smoothness that resemble the galaxy of the Milky Way ; the peerless glory of their brow ; the wisps of fluttering hair which Cupid spreads like golden nets to entangle lovers ; and those alluring cheeks which are more lovely in colour than the hyacinth or anemone. All other women in the world, Persian, Trojan, Greek, and Roman, are inferior to the British :

gloria virginibus debetur prima Britannis :  
extera, sat tibi sit, femina, posse sequi.

In fact, London seems to him to be the world-centre of beauty and love, and Venus herself to have abandoned her Mediterranean residences and to have fixed her permanent domicile in London.

So far it is the impressionable young poet who has been speaking : but in the final eight lines of the poem the rapture suddenly changes ; and the other Milton, the serious ascetic Puritan, asserts himself and frowns on such levity. While he is yet comparatively free from enslavement to Cupid, he decides that he must leave this blessed spot. He is going back to Cambridge : he is resolved on that : away from peace and pleasure

and beauty, back to the sedge-grown swamps of the Cam, *iuncosae Cami paludes*, and the hoarse shrill din of the Schools, *raucæ murmur scholæ*. And on this note of monastic abnegation the poem ends.

Though Milton has arranged his elegies for publication in a fairly strict chronological order, it is perhaps permissible that I should follow Elegy I with an account of Elegy VII which also belongs to the period of his undergraduate life and certainly deals with the same kind of subject. It is a semi-humorous narration of a juvenile love-affair that befell him in London, and he tells it very much in the conventional manner of Ovid in the *Amores*, beginning with a trial of strength between himself and the God of Love.

He says he had never been in love before : he was heart-whole and without experience of passion. Not that Cupid had not shot plenty of darts at him, but he had dodged these *puerilia tela*, and now regarded them as more suited for transfixing *imbelles columbas*. He advises the god to try his skill at shooting sparrows—*haec sunt militiae digna trophaea tuae*.

It was not to be expected, he tells us, that the god would take such insults passively and without revenge : and it is the god's revenge that the poem purports to tell of.

The scene is set in the spring of 1628, the day is 1 May, and the poet is now eighteen years old. He describes how the first light of early morning is just rousing him from sleep; and half-dreaming, half-waking, he sees Cupid standing by his couch, with coloured wings, bearing his quiver full of weapons, and on his face a look of charming menace : for he is determined to make this unbelieving youth realize what his power can achieve. There is a long speech from Cupid in which he enumerates his victories, all expressed in a properly Ovidian lightness of mythological instance-giving. But the poet is unimpressed :

et mihi de puero non metus ullus erat.

Then see what happens. Milton enjoys walking in the gardens of London, perhaps in Gray's Inn Fields, or Moorfields, or the Temple Garden, where the citizens are accustomed to take the air ; or perhaps he goes walking in the neighbouring country.

Everywhere on this May day he sees crowds of splendid girls, veritable goddesses—

facieque simillima turba dearum  
splendida per medias itque reditque vias.

They look so beautiful, so refulgent, that the day takes on a double brightness and the very sun seems to be shining with borrowed radiance. He is charmed and fascinated by the spectacle, enraptured almost against his will, like Adam in *Paradise Lost*—

Against his better knowledge, not deceived,  
But fondly overcome with female charm.

Hear what he says of himself : “ I darted glances to meet their glances and I could not control my gaze. I marked one girl who far excelled the others, and her shining beauty was the cause of all my woe. In just such beauty would Venus wish to be seen by mortals, in just such beauty would Juno the Queen of Heaven fain appear.” Of course, it was all the scheme of the naughty vengeful Cupid, who was lurking near with his arrows at the ready : he perches on the lady’s eyelids, her mouth, her lips, her cheeks, and from all these vantage-points he shoots his arrows at the infatuated youth :

protinus insoliti subierunt corda furores ;  
uror amans intus, flammaque totus eram.

But Cupid has not yet finished with him : the vision of loveliness that had captivated him is only momentary : the lady of his delight passes from his gaze, never to be seen again, and he is left with only a heart-rending nostalgic memory and longing—a state of mind which he proceeds to decorate with a long passage of elegiac woefulness. Not that the melancholy of love has not its pleasant side : he would gladly be free, but not wholly free :

deme meos tandem, verum nec deme furores :  
nescio cur, miser est suaviter omnis amans.

Still, he decides that it would be an advantage in any future affair if both parties could be smitten simultaneously by Cupid’s arrows, so that they might suffer in unison, not one alone in solitary anguish.

But, just as in the earlier poem, there is a change of mood at the end. Either at the time of composition, or at the time of publication in 1645, the poet added a short envoi of ten elegiac

lines in which the serious Puritan side of him (which was his predominant character) speaks to himself a word of reproof and condemnation. "Long ago, when my mind was senseless and my purpose irresolute, I wrote this poem—an empty trophy of my folly":

scilicet abreptum sic me malus impulit error  
indocilisque aetas prava magistra fuit.

But he found salvation and deliverance in philosophy, which he began to study at the University. From that moment the passion died in his breast: his one time emotional heart is now protected by a deep prophylactic layer of frost: even Cupid fears damage to his arrows by shooting them at such an indurated front; and Venus fears that, if she now tackles Milton, she will get the same rough usage that in the Trojan War she once had from Diomedes.

Still following Milton's autobiographical poems, I come now to the Sixth Elegy, written as a reply to a letter in verse from his friend Charles Diodati, who in this December of 1629 had been staying in the country and, writing to Milton, had asked that his verses should be excused for their poorness because in the country he had been having such hospitable and seasonable entertainment in the way of food, drink, and social company, that he was not in any fit state to compose correctly or elegantly. Milton begins his reply in a tone of banter: he sends his friend all good wishes for sound health, which (in view of the festivities) he may not at present be enjoying. But seriously, he says, the affection he feels for his friend is so great, so perfect, so complete that he could never hope to express it in the halting measures of verse: it simply will not fit into his imperfect, limping Latin lines.

But he has enjoyed reading Diodati's description of the festivities associated with *hilaris December* and with the feast that celebrates the *caelifugam Deum*, the One who

Forsook the courts of everlasting day  
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

Milton writes charmingly and appreciatively of the delights of Christmas in the country—the food, the wine, the comfortable fireside,

hiberni gaudia ruris  
haustaque per lepidos Gallica musta focos:

so he cannot understand or accept the other's plea that such

celebrations do not help poetic inspiration : far from it—poets write all the better for good food and wine, especially wine, for

carmen amat Bacchum, carmina Bacchus amat.

He regards this as a well attested fact ; the reason why Ovid sent such poor verses back from his exile in Tomi was that he had no supply of good victuals and no supply of good wine ; and he goes on to show by such examples as Anacreon, Pindar, and Horace that wine is a great and essential tonic to the poet's intellect and emotions. Therefore it must have been so with Charles Diodati on his country holiday : the luxurious spread of food, the noble entertainment, must have stimulated, not deadened, his poetic talent : for when Bacchus, Ceres, and Apollo are united in their aid to one man, he cannot help but write good verses :

scilicet haud mirum tam dulcia carmina per te  
numine composito tres peperisse deos.

So let there be no more of this nonsense of apologizing for the letter in verse he had sent !

But there is another element in this country merry-making for Christmas, an element which has a profound effect on a lyric or elegiac poet's mind—the sound of music and the sight of girls dancing to the music. Here is a spectacle to hold the Muses' interest and to summon back to the poet's command any powers that excess of liquor may have dulled. As the musicians play and the gay feminine crowd fills the rooms, a spectacle is provided that will bring Phoebus back to the elegiac poet's heart, stealing through his being like a sudden warmth. The fact is that of all the poetic kinds Elegy is this sort of temperamental goddess : she needs the right circumstances, the right environment, the right company to produce her best : and for elegiac poets *convivia larga* are the exact prescription.

All this has been charmingly playful and lighthearted banter from a poet who is not always regarded as capable of good-humoured raillery. But, as in the two previous poems, his mood suddenly changes, and he goes on to describe the sober, solemn mode of the poet who writes, not in the light style of the elegist, but in the grand majestic tone of the serious poet whose themes are wars and gods and heroes, the high court of Heaven, and the abyss of Hell. The poet who devotes himself to such subjects as



these must lead the ascetic life of a Pythagorean : he must set himself to hard study and spare diet : his youth must be chaste, his morals puritan, his hands clean from crime. He must be as sinless as the atoning priest approaching the presence of angry gods, and he must live his life with the aloof sanctity of fabled seers like Tiresias, Linos, Calchas, and Orpheus, or with the abstemious frugality of Homer or the stern resistance to temptation of Homer's Ulysses : for this kind of poet is set apart, sanctified and permeated by the divine spirit :

dis etenim sacer est vates, divomque sacerdos ;  
spirat et occultum pectus et ora lovem.

This is a statement of the serious poet's high calling, and it is early evidence of the formation in Milton of a personal rule and principle which he endeavoured to follow all through his life, as far as poetry was concerned, and in so far as political and religious controversy did not distract him. As a matter of fact, he is leading up to a declaration about some poetic work on which he had been engaged. He continues in something of this sense : " If you should ask, my dear Charles Diodati, what I myself have been composing in this approach to Christmas 1629, I have been writing a poem about the peace-bringing king of heavenly race, and the prosperous age promised in the Holy Books ; a poem about the infant crying of the child Jesus and the cradling in a humble house of the One who now with his Father occupies the Supreme Sovereignty. I sing of the starry sky and of the angelic companies that made music in heaven, and of the pagan gods suddenly banished to their shrines. This is the gift that I presented for the birthday of Christ : this is the theme that the first light brought to me as the Christmas dawn approached : this is the poem, written in English verse, *patriis meditata cicutis*, that I reserve, my dear friend, for your scrutiny and criticism when we next meet." Milton of course means the " Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity "—

Say, heavenly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein  
Afford a present to the infant God?  
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,  
To welcome Him to this his new abode,  
Now while the heaven, by the sun's team untrod,  
Hath took no print of the approaching light,  
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

See how from far upon the eastern road  
 The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet !  
 O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,  
 And it lay lowly at his blessed feet ;  
 Have thou the honour first thy Lord to greet,  
     And join thy voice unto the angel choir,  
 From out his secret altar touched with hallowed fire.

I now come to a poem of a very different tone and temper—the longest of Milton's Latin poems on the Gunpowder Plot. Every year nowadays as 5 November approaches or recedes, our newspapers are full of advance warnings or gloomy reflections about the dangers inherent in a too exuberant celebration of the occasion. I do not think the young Milton would have agreed: for in his time the great deliverance, vouchsafed by heaven to King and Parliament, was still freshly recent in the memory of the nation, and the day was observed by services of thanksgiving in the churches as well as by the more explosive forms of rejoicing which we have inherited. The Gunpowder Plot had been discovered on 5 November 1605: and it is quite clear that Milton had been brought up in a religious and political atmosphere which regarded the plot as evidence of a determined conspiracy against the national safety and the discovery of it as a divine intervention on behalf of England. Certainly the thought of the event had made a deep impression on Milton's mind, and he has celebrated it in four short epigrams *In Proditionem Bombardicam* probably written during his years at Cambridge (where, it will be recalled, Guy Fawkes night has always been an occasion of demonstrative celebration, though not generally of poetic celebration). He has also written a more substantial piece of 226 hexameter lines, cast in a semi-epic style much like one of Claudian's invective poems, and entitled *In Quintum Novembris*. This is the only major piece among the Latin poems into which Milton has injected something of that harsh controversial tone which is so evident in his later polemical writings. The date of the poem is probably some time in the Michaelmas Term of 1626 when Milton would have just entered on his third session at Cambridge. It seems to me a remarkable piece of writing from an undergraduate not yet eighteen years of age.

The poem opens with a somewhat unusual tribute to James I

as *pius*, as *pacificus*, as *felix divesque* and as himself the one who had united the two kingdoms of England and Scotland in what the poet terms an *inviolabile foedus*. This is the prosperous and serene united kingdom which Satan is imagined to have seen when, roaming the world to create turmoil, tumult, distrust and hatred, he begins to plot against the one people that has never submitted to his authority and against which he means to organize a revolution. Satan even in this early poem of Milton's is presented as such a power of evil, such a formidable and daemonic engineer of wickedness, that the description of him (though a mixture of Classical mythology and Biblical reminiscence) seems almost a premonitory sketch of the Satan, the fallen archangel, who appears in *Paradise Lost*. You may judge by the phrases in which he is characterized: *ferus ignifluo regnans Acheronte tyrannus*; *Eumenidum pater*; *aetherio vagus exul Olympo*; *fraudum magister*; *Summanus*; *cinctus caeruleae fumanti turbine flammae*; *niger umbrarum dominus rectorque silentum*; *praedator hominum*; *subdolanus serpens*. This is the malign potentate who cannot bear to look at the peace and happiness of Britain, or the prosperity of her farms, or her people *venerantem numina veri sancta Dei*: so in a frenzy of hatred he resolves to set in train his plan for destroying this stubborn race.

To do this it is necessary for Satan to visit Rome which, in the contemporary fashion of polemics, Milton sees as the centre of the anti-British plotting. The fiend flies southward, over the Alps, into Italy, down the Western side of the Appenines, across Etruria, until he sees where the Tiber debouches into the Ocean, and so comes to Rome. In the city the daylight is fading on the eve of St. Peter, 28 June 1605; and the great procession has passed through the streets, conducting the Pope, preceded by kings and accompanied by members of the religious orders, to St. Peter's where a magnificent service has been held in the torch-lit church. I omit much of the theological odium which Milton allows to colour parts of his pictures: it is there in the form of sharp abusive invective: it would have been salutary if he had been required to disclose the source of his information! Such remarks were the commonplace of religious differences in those days, but now are out of date and doubtless best forgotten.

The Pope returns to his residence and, as he prepares to fall asleep, Satan appears before him in the assumed guise of a hermit—with silvery hair, a great beard falling over his front, a long habit that swept the ground, a cowl on his head, and a hempen rope tied round his waist ; and then in a long impassioned speech he appeals to the Pope to bestir himself and to deal sternly with the impious people of Britain who have rejected apostolic discipline and government :

turgentes animos et fastus frange procaces,  
sacrilegique sciant tua quid maledictio possit,  
et quid apostolicae possit custodia clavis.

Let him therefore hear of a plan to crush this perverse and insufferable people which, having already destroyed the Armada, may before long burst into the Mediterranean, enter the Sea of Tuscany, and actually invade the city of the seven hills. Satan counsels, not open war, but a secret plot that will destroy the King with his Lords and Commons by blowing them sky-high on the day when Parliament re-assembles,

nitratu pulveris igne  
aeribus iniecto, qua convenere, sub imis ;

and this will be a signal for a revolution, assisted by the French or Spaniards, which will re-establish papal rule in England.

This is the plan that is described as being put into operation in the last eighty lines of the poem. The execution of it is entrusted to two ugly personified villains, Murder and Treason, who are to go to Britain—

tartareoque leves diffidentur pulvere in auras  
et rex et pariter satrapae, scelerata propago.

But the One who watches over the well-being of his favoured British nation smiles as he sees the hopelessly stupid efforts of these futile plotters. He has only to bid Fame spread the rumour of this unholy plot—and the country is roused to the danger : the conspirators are discovered and, in celebration of the deliverance, “ the city squares are joyfully ablaze with genial bonfires and throngs of young folk are dancing : no day in all the year comes with more festive celebration than the Fifth of November ! ”—

compita laeta focus genialibus omnia fumant :  
turba chorus iuvenilis agit : Quintoque Novembris  
nulla dies toto occurrit celebratior anno.

By the time Milton left Cambridge in 1632, his father, now an elderly man of almost seventy, had retired from the family home in Cheapside, London to a small estate which he had bought at Horton, near Windsor, in Buckinghamshire. It was here in his father's house that Milton spent the years 1632-8, giving himself to the study of literature and to a certain amount of writing. The poem, *Ad Patrem*, upon which I shall now touch, belongs to the earlier part of this period, and has as its theme the poet's profound gratitude to his father for having understood his wish to have undisturbed study and meditation, and for not having forced him, now that he had finished with Cambridge, to enter some business or profession which might prove uncongenial or thwarting to one who was now sure that his true vocation was poetry and literature. This father, John Milton, Senior, was a man of remarkable talent and culture : by profession he had been a scrivener, eminently successful and prosperous in his business : but there was nothing bourgeois or illiberal about his way of life : for he was passionately devoted to music and was himself known as a composer : above all, he believed in education and had brought up his family in an atmosphere of generous appreciation of the arts ; and it is a happy circumstance that at this moment of decision he understood, and sympathized with, the wishes of his extraordinarily gifted son. That his confidence in his son's genius was not mistaken is proved by the appearance in these years not only of this Latin poem, a most affectionate and moving tribute to a father's kindness, but of that remarkable series of English poems, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Arcades*, *Comus*, and *Lycidas*.

The beginning of our poem reminds me of the Roman poet Persius' famous address to his tutor in philosophy, his spiritual parent, Cornutus. In exactly that sense, Milton asks the Muse for a plenitude of inspiration in order to voice adequately the tribute he wishes to pay to this *pater optimus*. Though his poem may turn out to be an *exiguum opus*, he feels that no gift within his power is more appropriate than this as an acknowledgement of all his father has done for him—though he admits that as an acknowledgement even the richest of gifts would be poor and inadequate, much less a gift that consists only of words, empty words : but words are the only wealth he possesses, the sole gift

he has to offer—and he would not have had even that, if it had not been for the kindness of the Muse and the generosity of his father.

The poem is, in the main, a defence of poetry addressed with great respect and deference to one whose prime delight and interest is music. He holds that nothing so much attests the heavenly origin of man as this poetic talent which shows in itself some elements of the divine flame brought by Prometheus from heaven to earth; and he reinforces this by a long paragraph of instances in which he passes from the heavenly music of the planets to the primeval music of the tribal bard and then on to poets proper. But he recurs to his argument about the importance of words, articulate and expressive *words* as distinct from mere voice modulation—*vocis modulamen . . . verborum sensusque vacans*. What is the value of Lieder ohne Worte? This musical trilling may be all very well for the chorus of birds in the woods, but it is beneath the intelligence of human beings.

Therefore he prays his father not to despise the poetic art which, after all, has been greatly used by him in his musical compositions, especially as he is an artist skilled in the arrangement of words to music. It should be no surprise that such a musical father should have a son whose special gift is in the cognate art of poetry. In fact, it might be said that Phoebus, the god of music and of poesy, has bestowed one of his attributes on the father and the other on the son :

ipse volens Phoebus se dispertire duobus,  
altera dona mihi dedit, altera dona parenti;  
dividuumque deum genitorque puerque tenemus.

But his gratitude is particularly expressed to his father because, though not altogether sharing in his son's passion for poetry, he had generously given him a literary education, providing the means necessary, indulging his love of books and seclusion, and finding the best instructors not only in Greek and Latin, but in Hebrew also and in modern French and Italian. Such an education and such knowledge, which are far above the possession of mere wealth, entitle Milton to do something which he supremely values—to take his place, though without arrogance, among the learned of the nation, secure from the dislike and envy

of the *profanum vulgus*. And so he concludes his poem with a word of affectionate farewell, "My dear father, since I am not given the power to repay you as you deserve nor to recompense you for your gifts by any *action*, let it be enough to *say in words* what you have done, and with thankful mind to recall and recount your kindnesses, and to treasure them in an ever loyal heart."

In 1638 Milton, with his father's approval, went abroad to spend a year in Italy. On the outward journey he stayed at Florence and Rome, and was received into the learned societies and academies of the two cities, making his contribution to the literary contests and greatly enjoying the welcome and admiration accorded to him. He spent a considerable time also at Naples where he met Manso, the Marquis of Villa, who had been the patron of the poet Tasso: and to this patron of letters he addressed an elegant hexameter poem in which he expresses the hope that, as Fortune had sent such a noble patron to the epic poet Tasso, so she may provide a similarly generous protector to the young visitor from the North (*missus Hyperboreo iuvenis peregrinus ab axe*) who is meditating an epic in English which will trace the history of the Britons from the mythological coming of Trojan Brutus down to the reign of King Arthur. There are hints and allusions in the earlier Latin poems which indicate that some plan for a major poem of this kind was forming in Milton's mind, but so far there had been nothing so explicit: the plan is set out in even more definite form in the poem we are now to discuss.

The stay in Italy was cut short on account of the disturbing news from home about the quarrel developing between the King and Parliament; he returned to England in 1639 after a leisurely progress through Rome, Florence, Geneva, and Paris. Altogether he had been away about fifteen months: in his absence his friend Charles Diodati had died; and as an expression of his grief and a tribute to a young man *ingenio, doctrina, clarissimisque ceteris virtutibus egregius*, he composed in pastoral style the *Epitaphium Damonis*, in which under the guise of the shepherd Thyrsis he laments the death of his fellow-shepherd Damon—something after the manner of Theocritus in the first Idyll and Virgil in the Fifth Eclogue where lament is made in song for the

death of Daphnis. The *Epitaphium* is a poem almost entirely in the pastoral convention: the shepherds have pastoral names: the scenery is Arcadian: the sheep are left untended while the shepherd pours forth his grief: anyone who knows Theocritus and Virgil will recognize the model for many of the characters and scenes. Yet, for all its conventional setting, the sorrow is not fictitious or unreal: the deep personal sense of loss is everywhere present, and the pastoral form does not make the poet's grief less genuine or less credible. It is worth noting, however, that at the end of the poem the poet Milton almost breaks through the pastoral overlay to speak in his own person about real things and real places. I am surprised that Dr. Samuel Johnson, that devastating critic of pastoral, had not noticed this break for freedom.

Thyrsis, the singing shepherd in the poem, is made to reveal that he has been away from his native fields visiting one of the Etruscan cities, and has been delayed there by *dulcis amor Musae* until the second year after the death of Damon: and then on returning home he finds that the friend who had shared his work and his music had perished in his absence—to his inconsolable misery and bereavement:

tum vero amissum tum denique sensit amicum :  
coepit et immensum sic exonerare dolorem.

Must his friend be forgotten, he asks: must his noble name and spirit perish utterly among the nameless throng of the dead? not if Thyrsis can prevent it by his poetry! Damon's fame must be made as secure as the Daphnis of Theocritus or Virgil,

dum rura Pales, dum Faunus amabit.

I need not rehearse to you all the incidents of the poem, nor tell of the friends who came to comfort, or remonstrate with, the sorrowing Thyrsis. All this is the stuff of pastoral, and you can judge it for yourselves from the not dissimilar scenes in *Lycidas*. I will come at once to the last sixty lines or so where the shepherd, becoming more and more not Thyrsis but Milton, reproaches himself for his overlong stay in Italy—though he admits that his visit to the city on the Arno and the society of the *pastores Tusci*



and his presence at their contests of song had all been exceedingly pleasant and worthwhile ; and he modestly refers to his own poems recited in the Italian assemblies and to the flattering praises bestowed on them. ' How he had looked forward to meeting Damon again and to telling him about all these experiences ! He had imagined that they would sit " by the waters of the Colne (near Horton) or in the fields of Cassivellaunus ", and Damon would tell him about his progress in medicine and his knowledge of *materia medica* :

tu mihi percurres medicos, tua gramina, succos,  
helleborumque, humilesque crocos, foliumque hyacinthi,  
quasque habet ista palus herbas, artesque medentum.

I need hardly translate this, for it will already have brought to your mind a certain shepherd lad in *Comus*

well skilled  
In every virtuous plant and healing herb  
That spreads her verdant leaf to the morning ray :  
He loved me well, and oft would beg me sing,  
Which when I did, he on the tender grass  
Would sit and hearken even to ecstasy,  
And in requital ope his leather'n scrip,  
And show me simples of a thousand names,  
Telling their strange and vigorous faculties.

In return Thyrsis had intended to tell Damon about a magnificent poem the plan of which had come to him a short time before—an epic theme so vast that its style and utterance were too grand for the slender tones of a pastoral pipe. So he bids the pastoral Muse withdraw, and Thyrsis, transformed into Milton, outlines his scheme for an epic poem on British history from its origins under its Trojan king, Brutus, down reign by reign to the coming of King Arthur. This will be the end of his Latin pastoral poetry : he means to treat a British subject in heroic style and in the English language. He doesn't mind if, by dropping Latin, the international language, he suffers a loss of fame in the outside world : it is glory enough for him and reward enough if his British poem is read by British people, by dwellers beside the Ouse, or beside the Alaun, beside the Humber, beside the Trent, beside his own dear river the Thames, beside the Tamar in the

west or near the Orkneys in the north. It is in this way that Milton sketches his plan, one of many plans, for a major epic—much as Virgil in the opening lines of the third Georgic outlines his plan for an epic on the wars and victories of Augustus. I hope you will agree with me that the *Epitaphium Damonis* is one of the most interesting and effective of Milton's Latin poems: personally, I think that it is the best of them all.

How then shall I sum up my opinion of these poems? They give me an impression not of haste but of energy, of vigorous intellectual power wishing to express, rapidly and flowingly, the thoughts that pour into the young poet's mind. There are some mistakes of prosody, though in the hexameters and elegiacs they are not unduly numerous. There are mistakes of wording and even of syntax, but again not numerous. Dr. Johnson put the matter succinctly and in proportion when he said of one of the poems that "it was not secure against a *stern* grammarian". But I attribute these peccadilloes of our author not to bad scholarship, not to carelessness, but to an impatience with precision and exactitude that might impede the flow and expression of his thought. You get something of the same thing in the introduction to *Paradise Lost* where he explains his reasons for discarding rhyme as limiting his freedom of utterance and as a "vexation, hindrance, and a constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse, than else they would have been expressed". What strikes me most in these Latin poems is the power and the ardour that inform them. They are not verses made with the dictionary. They are not patch-work poems, not centoes "tricked out in splendid shreds of Virgil's dress": they are poems of free composition, the natural vigorous output of a young, but powerful, mind, far more concerned with what it has to say than with a meticulous correctness. It is a mind that teems with Classical knowledge: it has Latin words at its call and command, but it will invent at times rather than fail to express: it is a mind that indeed is still immature, if by immature I can be taken to mean not yet at the full development of its foreshadowed genius. And I think that the poems reveal a person who is still kindly and human and even playful, not yet hardened and encrusted by the impact of religious

and political controversies. I like these early poems and have enjoyed reading them ; and, though I am a Latinist, I have enjoyed seeing the true poet in Milton throw off the restraints of the foreign language and break out into the magnificent freedom of his English. I only hope I have not misused your time in allowing the young, inchoate Milton to speak to you through these *juvenalia*.