Milton and the Tension of Poetic Inspiration

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W. R. Parker's description of Milton's faith-journey fascinates me. His biography traces Milton's arduous search for a religious faith that remained true to his evolving conception of church and civil government, of personal freedoms and rights, and of individual worship. Milton began his faith journey as a young boy, inculcated in his father's rebellious Protestant faith and raised to enter the ministry. As the Episcopal prelacy increased its influence Milton's personal beliefs aligned more closely with the Presbyterian model of church government, a more egalitarian "from the bottom up" organization. As each system of church government fell prey, however, to similar forms of corruption—collusion with the civil government—Milton fell further and further away from organized state religion as a legitimate expression of faith. He renounced the Presbyterian model of church government and, late in his life, rejected any manner of organized religion at all, settling upon a purely individual system of religious expression separated totally from civil government. Parker humanely presents Milton's theological and spiritual evolution as painful and deeply personal, reflecting the internal tension Milton certainly must have felt as he developed his own faith.

Unresolved tension drives Milton's early poetry. Though I will later provide close readings of two selections to demonstrate the nature of this tension, several preliminary examples will serve to illustrate this unease. In *Elegia Sexta*, Milton wavers between the sensational "bacchic" and the austere "intellectual" without placing himself in either camp. In the companion poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* the speaker invites both Mirth and Melancholy to provide him a lifestyle without selecting one or the other. In *Ad Patrem* Milton discloses his future poetic aspiration independent of his father's pressure to take Holy Orders, but does not state his unequivocal intention to pursue either. The Italian sonnets and the *Canzone* present a poet torn between his desire to write pastoral love poetry and a conviction that he should write serious and

intellectual epic poetry. *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* presents the dangerous tension between sensuality and chastity with no clear indication that, without supernatural intervention, one can conquer the other. Several elegies, including *Epitaph on the Marchioness of Windsor* and *Lycidas*, demonstrate the irresolvable conflict between the inexpressible grief of tragic loss and the poet's responsibility to provide poetic consolation. Even in his mature poetry, the concluding books of *Paradise Lost* hover between the horrors of childbirth and the need to beget descendents in order to overcome Satan eternally. Unresolved tension, the precise point of departure between bipolar opposition, drives these poems and demonstrates Milton's considerable poetic power.

Milton's historical background and personal life must inform any study of his poetry.[1] A study of Milton's early life—as a university and self-taught student, as a religious man struggling to find practical faith, and as an inspired poet—reveals the author's anxiety about his vocational future and poetic aspirations. Milton the student writer encountered many contrary impulses about "proper" and "worthy" poetic vocation and inspiration. His tentative understanding of poetic inspiration expresses itself in unresolved tension throughout his early poetry, especially obvious in *Elegia Sexta* and the companion poems. Milton's early poetry draws its strength from such unresolved tension which, in his later poetry, evolved into tension produced by combining his poetic vocation with his religious calling, figuring himself as epic poet-prophet.

[1] Historical and biographical factors exert tremendous and vital influence upon any thorough reading of Milton's poetry. One example among many will support this argument. Leah Marcus demonstrates, in "Justice for Margery Evans: A 'Local' Reading of *Comus*" (*Milton and the Idea of Woman*, Ed. Julia M. Walker, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, 66-85), that Milton's *Mask* takes on tremendous significance when studied in light of the social and political realities of time and place. See also Nancy Weitz Miller's "Chastity, Rape, and Ideology in the Castlehaven Testimonies and Milton's Ludlow Mask" (*Milton Studies* 32) and A. N. Wilson's chapter "The Courtier" (*The Life of John Milton*) for further support of the need to study the political, social, and economic realities of Milton's lifetime in order to fully appreciate his work (in this case *A Mask*).

John Milton, Sr. sent his son to Cambridge to study for the ministry. Early in his Cambridge years John Milton, Jr. obediently heeded this expectation. Parker suggests that he probably never made the irrevocable decision to abandon the ministry and turn poet until returning from his Italian trip in 1639. Parker offers this date to refute Tillyard's suggestion that Milton's early poetry reveals his early dedication to an exclusive poetic vocation, rejecting his father's desire to see his son take Holy Orders. Though any dating of Milton's desire to become a poet must be speculative, Parker believes that Milton considered himself a candidate for the ministry until much later in his career than others have suggested (Parker 69-70). For example, John Spencer Hill suggests that Milton decided to become a poet early in his career, but that Milton continued with his plan to take Holy Orders through 1640 when he realized he had been "Church-outed by the Prelats." Hill's conception of Milton as "dual-vocational" for a time—aiming to become both pet and priest—denies the traditional assumption that "Milton's decision to become a poet is . . . intimately connected with his resolve to abandon a career in the Church." A. S. P. Woodhouse suggests that Milton switched from plans to be a minister to plans to be a poet "in 1632, on the threshold of Milton's retirement from Hammersmith." John T. Shawcross places the decision in 1637 (Hill 41). A. N. Wilson, on the other hand, unequivocally states that Milton determined his exclusively poetic vocation upon writing the *Nativity Ode* (1629), a suggestion that I find questionable (Wilson 33). Woodhouse's dating Milton's decision to become a poet in 1632 seems incredibly early, but nothing as incredible as 1629. *The Passion* expresses Milton's insecurity in his poetic readiness, a point Wilson glosses over. Certainly writing *A Mask* (1634) played a vital role in Milton's decision to become a poet because it demonstrated the possibility of independent success as a writer, an issue that probably weighed heavily on Milton the longer he

relied upon his father's support.[2] Hill allows the possibility of Parker's claim that Milton made his choice to be exclusively a poet, *not* a priest, no earlier than 1639 after his Italian trip. "Milton has a firm sense of poetic direction and purpose, and his recognition that poetry is an extension of the ministerial function resolves any vocational tension between poetry and the pulpit, for Milton believes himself to be a national poet-priest who will serve as God's spokesman and interpreter through poetry" (Hill 41).

Though Milton did not decide to become a poet until later in his life, he also did not become a minister at the "traditional" age of twenty-four[3] (Parker 113). Unquestionably his father wondered when Milton would announce his decision to take Holy Orders. Evidence like *Ad Patrem*'s defense of the poetic vocation, in religious and musical terms that his father would appreciate, suggests his father pressured him to remain single-mindedly devoted to that cause (126). Milton Sr. probably agreed to support his son's independent study during the Horton years because he expected his studies were nothing less than independent preparation for the ministry. Yet Milton must have felt early doubts about his call to the ministry: doubts grounded in his sensual nature, in his critical censure of Cambridge University's religious educational philosophy, and in his blossoming theological and ideological antagonism toward prelacy and parliamentary involvement in church government.[4]

Milton may well have feared that his sensual nature—illustrated clearly in his erotic and undisciplined early elegies and sonnets—could never coincide with the priestly vocation. He

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[2] See Woodhouse, "Notes on Milton's Early Development" (*UTQ* 13 [1942-3]: 66-101) and Shawcross, "Milton's Decision to Become a Poet" (*MLQ* 24 [1963]: 21-30).

[3] In a note commenting on Milton's decision, after graduation, to continue his studies through private reading, Parker again argues that Milton had not yet made his decision to abandon the ministry at the age of twenty-three in 1632 (776 n95).

[4] Parker's chapters Hammersmith, 1632-1635 and Horton, 1635-1638 detail the "sleight of hand" he may have played with his father. Milton surely suspected his poetic calling early, but worked and studied to find a way to

expresses these doubts in the *Canzone* where voices of "amorous young men and maidens, jesting" criticize his choice of language and subject matter—Italian as sensual language of love—and suggest that he could do better. Milton cannot avoid the conflict between "serious" and "sensuous" even in his most religious of poems, *The Nativity Ode*, which contains these erotic images:

> Nature in awe to him
> Had doff't her gaudy trim,
> With her great Master so to sympathize:
> It was no season then for her
> To Wanton with the Sun, her lusty Paramour.
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> II
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> Only with speeches fair
> She woos the gentle Air
> To hide her guilty front with innocent Snow,
> And on her naked shame,
> Pollute with sinful blame,
> The Saintly Veil of Maiden white to throw,
> Confounded that her Maker's eyes
> Should look so near upon her foul deformities.

He certainly doubted that his Cambridge education could adequately prepare him for either poetic or priestly vocation in such a divisive period in Church history, particularly as he found himself veering further away from Cambridge's mainstream Episcopal conception of the Church as a political and theological construct.[5] Publishing *Of Education* provided Milton an opportunity to critique the English system of education by presenting his rehabilitated curriculum for leaders. His plan's strengths and characteristics surely coincide with Milton's perceived weaknesses in the English system. Without a doubt the Episcopacy and its desire to "inflict" religion on the people

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combine that poetic calling with his religious fervor. See Hill's figuring of Milton as "poet-priest," a term I use to mean "serious epic poet," in "Poet-Priest: Vocational Tension in Milton's Early Development."

[5] See *Of Education* for his indictment of England's university system of education. See *An Apology* for his criticism of Cambridge's "Anglican bias" (Parker 776).

from above infuriated the young Milton whose conceptions of the individual included political and religious freedom of thought and expression made more vivid by his own classmates' incarcerations for poetic license. In short, Milton had good reason to mistrust his ministerial calling, though what vocation could be chosen instead remained as questionable.

As Milton weathered uncertainties about his future vocation, he also battled doubts about poetic inspiration. If he *were* to become a poet, what subjects and lifestyles were worthy inspirations? Milton's poetic faculty seemed stimulated by a sensual lifestyle and by an intellectual lifestyle. Throughout Milton's poetry, sensual pastoral inspiration battles with intellectual elegiac and epic inspiration. In *Elegia Sexta* both the disciplined intellectual and the bacchic reveler find ample inspiration to write. Of "bacchic Diodati" Milton writes that sumptuous wine and provisions provide "creative impulse" similar to that experienced by Horace:

> Quadrimoque madens Lyricen Romanus Iaccho
> Dulce canit Glyceran, flavicomamque Chloen.
> Iam quoque lauta tibi generoso mensa paratu
> Mantis alit vires ingeniumque fovet.
> Massica foecundam despumant pocula venam,
> Fundis et ex ipso condita metra cado.
> Addimus his artes, fusumque per intima Phoebum
> Corda;[6]

Of the sober intellectual poet, Milton suggests that disciplined living provides inspiration like that experienced by poets Tiresias and Homer:

> Hoc ritu vixisse ferunt post rapta sagecem
> Lumina Tiresian, Ogygiumque Linon,
> Et lare devoto profugum Calchanta, senemque
> Orpheon edomitis sola per antra feris.
> Sic dapis exiguus, sic rivi potor Homerus

[6] "In his potestations of four-year-old wine the Roman lyricist sang of Glycera and of golden-haired Chloe. In your case also the sumptuous board with its generous provisions gives strength to your mind and fire to your genius. Your Campanian cups foam with creative impulse and you decant the store of your verse out of the wine-jar itself. To all this we add the arts and Apollo's presence in your secret heart" (Hughes 51).

Dulichium vexit per freta longa virum[7]

In *Sonnet I* Milton speaks of having "fallen" into writing that sensuous love poetry onto which he had formerly "poured contempt," suggesting the inner struggle over inspiration (Hughes 55). Countless other examples of this conflict could be provided, including erotic passages included in his later epic *Paradise Lost*. In his early poetic career Milton wavered between sensuous and intellectual subjects as inspiration for his poetry.

Milton also struggled to determine how he should best achieve inspiration—through a life of willful sensuality or through a life of disciplined, limited experience. Within this struggle rests a significant issue in Milton scholarship, that of young Milton's chastity and its relation to his blossoming perceptions of poetic inspiration and vocation.

Most of the serious debate on this issue centers around *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* in which Milton writes of "the Sun-clad power of Chastity" and "the serious doctrine of Virginity" (*Comus* 782, 787). Parker suggests no autobiographical relationship between Milton's sexual attitudes and the subject of *A Mask*, yet some scholars conjecture that Milton wrote of "the serious doctrine of Virginity" because he deliberately chose to live a chaste life of virginity in order to seek divine inspiration for his poetry.[8] Evidence exists for such an interpretation in the "casta juvenis" of *Elegia Sexta* and the implications of Milton's autobiographical sketches in *An Apology* and *The Reason of Church Government*. In *An Apology* Milton defends himself against allegations of sexual misconduct "in playhouses and the bordelloes" (Hughes 691) during the

[7] "By this rule [living sparingly, drinking water and eating herbs, conducting oneself irreproachably] it is said that the wise Tiresias lived after the loss of his eyes, and Ogygian Linus, and Calchas when he was a fugitive from his doomed home, and Orpheus in his old age, when he tamed the wild beasts among the lonely caves. So Homer, the spare eater and water-drinker, carried Ulysses through vast stretches of ocean..." (Hughes 52).

[8] See such books and articles as Mary Anne Hutchinson's "*Comus* and Milton's Maturing Concept of Chastity" (*THOTH: Syracuse University Graduate Studies in English* 14.2-3 [1974]: 39-52) and Edward Le Comte's *Milton and Sex* (New York: MacMillan, 1978).

Horton years: "I learned what a noble virtue chastity sure must be, to the defense of which so many worthies, by such dear adventures of themselves, had sworn" (Hughes 694). In *Reason of Church Government* Milton describes his ambition to become a "poet-prophet" by describing it as a work not to be raised from the heat of youth, or the vapors of wine" (Hughes 671). The implication drawn from these passages, when related to the Lady's "serious doctrine of Virginity," is that Milton himself underwent an intentional and self-sacrificial period of sexual abstinence in order to attain higher and greater poetic insight and inspiration. Thomas Embry, who wrote a useful article on the sensuous language of the companion poems,[9] went so far as to write his doctoral dissertation on the specific origins and tenets of Milton's religious Doctrine of Chastity.[10] His very thesis depends upon the assumption that Milton did, indeed, deliberately abstain from sex in order to receive poetic inspiration. Drawn by an attraction toward Milton's self-sacrifice in exchange for poetic inspiration, I wrote a paper in which I traced Milton's deliberate celibacy, his "doctrine of virginity," through his early poetry to his marriage in 1642 to Mary Powell.

Sociological history calls into doubt Milton's deliberate celibacy as an application of his doctrine of virginity. As a young Puritan, no matter how "emancipated" or "liberated,"[11] societal and personal mores simply would not have allowed Milton the "luxury" of any lifestyle but sexual abstinence before marriage.[12] His decision to marry late may not have been as unusual as we consider such a decision today; even if seventeenth-century society did find Milton's decision to delay marriage unusual, his biography and social history provide several possible solutions. First,

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[9] "Sensuality and Chastity in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 77 (1978): 504-29.

[10] *The Ideal of Chastity in Milton's Early Poetry*. Georgia State University, 1981.

[11] to apply grossly inadequate and anachronistic terms

[12] Theodore De Welles, in "Sex and Sexual Attitudes in Seventeenth-Century England: The Evidence from Puritan Diaries," (*Renaissance and Reformation* 12.1 [1988]: 45-64), argues that some Puritans reveled in sex, but certainly only within wedlock. Sexual relations outside of marriage were a fantasy for some Puritans (male and

as "the Lady of Christ's Coll:," studying for seven straight years in the company of male students and teachers only, he may not have felt entirely comfortable around women. Second, he may have found studying and self-education more important than marriage. Third, he may have been traumatized by the fear of childbirth mortality, evidenced by the deeply painful feelings in *Epitaph on the Marchioness of Windsor*.[13] Whatever the reason, Milton's "chastity" probably reflects no more than common socially acceptable and prescriptive behavior, not a deliberate attempt to live a lifestyle conducive for epic poetic inspiration. If Parker's conclusion is accurate that Milton decided to devote his life to poetry after returning from Italy, any attempt to assign Milton's sexual abstinence before that as an effort to seek pure "divine poetic inspiration" negates Parker's conclusion and may reflect an uninformed understanding of seventeenth-century Puritan society.

Milton's early poetry reveals its power in the unresolved tension of poetic inspiration and vocation. During the years prior to 1639 Milton remained unconvinced about his vocation and undecided about his poetic sources and subjects of inspiration. His poetry reflects that indecision. It is important to note, however, that the *lack* of resolution drives the poetry, not a decision to *choose* one source of inspiration or one vocation over another. I will fully demonstrate this

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female, as revealed in their diaries), but were a social taboo. No devout Puritan expected or anticipated sex before marriage.

[13] The Marchioness was twenty-three at her death, Milton twenty-two. Although Milton resolves his feelings in the elegy's *consolatio*, these lines reflect genuine discomfort on Milton's part:

> But whether mischance or blame
> *Atropos* for *Lucina* came,
> And with remorseless cruelty
> Spoil'd at once both fruit and tree:
> The hapless babe before its birth
> Had burial, yet not laid in earth,
> And the languisht Mother's Womb
> Was not long a living Tomb.

Figuring the poem as a living flower, almost a "replacement" for the child, along with Milton's anxiety in *On Shakespear* that Shakespeare's genius "Dost make us Marble with too much conceiving," seem to express Milton's discomfort with both physical and poetic act of birth.

principle in two obviously dichotomous poems, *Elegia Sexta* and the companion poems, then submit several other works as possible examples for further study.

As I suggested earlier, Milton presents two personae in *Elegia Sexta*: the "bacchic reveler-poet" which Milton seems to associate with Charles Diodati, and the "disciplined poet-priest" which Milton seems to associate with himself. To attach specific names to these personae, however, suggests Milton's preference of one persona over another, a suggestion that cannot be completely supported by the text. Diodati himself had suggested the incompatibility of poetry and sensuous living, writing, "poetry is a fugitive from wine and feasting" (50). Milton spends a considerable portion of the poem (thirty-three lines) defending partying with good wine and food as proper inspirations for poetry. He places the poetry Diodati wrote describing the succulent feasts of December alongside his own *Nativity Ode*, writing "Quam bene solemnes epulas, hilaremque Decembrim / Festaque caelifugam quae coluere Deum"[14] (9-10). He lists the gods and poets inspired by wine and revelry—Bacchus,[15] Apollo, Ceres, Ovid, Anacreon, and Horace—and places Diodati as "bacchic reveler" among such great company. This elaborate defense, though lighthearted, does not admit irony or insincerity.

A shorter portion of the poem (twenty-five lines) Milton devotes to the defense of disciplined poetic lifestyle lacking sensual excess. Milton writes,

> At qui bella refert, et adulto sub Iove caelum,
> Heroasque pios, semideosque duces
> Et nunc sancta canit superum consulta deorum,
> Nunc latrata fero regna profundo cane,
> Ille quidem parce Samii pro more magistri

[14] "How well you report the splendid festivals and the hilarious December—the festivals which do honor to the heaven-forsaking God" (Hughes 50).
[15] Also called Lyaeus, "the releaser," and Teumesian Euan, "inspirer of Pindar's Odes"

Vivat, praebeat herba cibos.[16]

He suggests that a poet whose subject is noble should live a disciplined life. The argument, though shorter than his defense of sensual living, provides a sound case and presents classical examples such as Tiresias and Homer. Milton seems to paint the poet-priest as a more significant contributor of verse, reserving the weightier subjects of gods and heroes for such a poet.

Reading the poem as Milton's attempt to privilege the poet-priest over the bacchic reveler ignores the poem's first eight lines, the last eleven lines, the harmony of defenses, and the poem's relation to the *Nativity Ode*. In the first eight lines Milton introduces his elegy as a response to Diodati's verses about December revelry. He begins with a humorous suggestion in lines one and two that Diodati may be "hung over" from too much revelry, then ironically undercuts the entire poem in lines five through eight by intimating that no poem could communicate his true feelings. He also expresses what may be his confusion about vocation with a complaint that Diodati will not allow his muse to remain in "the obscurity that she craves" (Hughes 50). These eight lines, particularly those which undercut the message, hint that the poem cannot be taken as accurate self-expression and introduce tension between the inexpressible nature of emotions and the poet's job of expressing emotions in conventional linear verse.

In the last eleven lines Milton clearly indicates that he is writing of the very same subject as that of the "poet-priest," "Paciferum canims caelesti semine regem, / Faustaque sacratis saecula pacta libris"[17] (81-82). These lines refer to the *Nativity Ode* whose subject Milton felt sacred and worthy of disciplined living. This connection may suggest that, to write this poem, he felt a need

[16] "But he whose theme is wars and heaven under Jupiter in his prime, and pious heroes and chieftains half-divine, and he who sings of the sacred counsels of the gods on high, and now of he infernal realms where the fierce dogs howl, let him live sparingly, like the Samian teacher, and let herbs furnish his innocent diet" (Hughes 52).
[17] "singing the heaven-descended King, the bringer of peace, and the blessed times promised in the sacred books" (Hughes 52).

to live a disciplined lifestyle. Note that the reference is to the *Nativity Ode* only, however, and not to his poetry in general. Any privileging of one means of inspiration over another refers only to the *Nativity Ode*, not to Milton's poetry as a whole.

Concerning the poem's construction, the tone shifts from lighthearted gaiety to somber reverence, and the respective arguments are complemented by appropriate imagery. The "bacchic" poet's inspiration, sensuous in nature, comes with the festive throng:

> dum psallit ebur, comitataque plectrum
> Implet odoratos festa chorea tholos,
> Percipies tacitum per pectora serpere Phoebum,
> Quale repentinus permeat ossa calor;
> Perque puellares oculos digitumque sonantem
> Irruet in totas lapsa Thalia sinus.[18]

The poet-priest's inspiration, however, comes only through a sparse and disciplined lifestyle "Qualis vesta nitens sacra, et lustralibus undis, / Surgis ad infensos augure iture Deos"[19] (65-66). Milton's defense of each is appropriate in its style and indicates Milton's poetic ability and skill, equally impressive as "bacchic reveler" and "poet-priest." The poem's impact upon its reader is its inability to choose between the two modes of inspiration, the two lifestyles, and the two poetic styles—its irresolvable tension between extremes. Given Milton's indecision concerning vocation and inspiration, the poem accurately depicts Milton's inner struggle.

Too many to name specifically are the scholars who have debated the nature of the companion poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. One major school of criticism descends from Ben Johnson's linear interpretation which suggests that Milton favors the lifestyle of "il penseroso" and places it after the poem about "l'allegro" to reflect this preference. A more modern critical

[18] "when the ivory key is played and the festive throng dances through the perfumed halls to the sound of the lute, you will fell the silent approach of Phoebus in your breast like a sudden heat that permeates to the marrow; and through a maiden's eye and music-making fingers Thalia will glide into full possession of you breast" (Hughes 51).

school suggests that each poem complements the other to make a cyclical whole that, though each could stand alone, achieves unity only by their relationship to one another.[20] These critics suggest that Milton believed life must have some "mirth" and some "melancholy," each in its due time and course. Given their approximate dating of 1631 or shortly after, I suggest that these poems fit into neither interpretative camp, but reflect Milton's tension described elsewhere between vocations and poetic inspiration.

As in *Elegia Sexta* we find the argument between sensuous, mirthful living and disciplined, melancholy living. As in *Elegia Sexta* we find Milton defending each in its turn, and each defense seems convincing and sincere. At the beginning of *L'Allegro* Melancholy is banished into the hermit's cell to which the narrator had escaped to find inspiration in *Il Penseroso*. At the beginning of *Il Penseroso* Mirth, though not specifically named, is banished to sunbeams and dreams of the slumber-god Morpheus, to which the narrator had escaped to find inspiration at the end of *L'Allegro*. In this and many other ways these poems achieve perfect complementary companionship.

That the poems are companions need not be proven nor argued. The question remains whether these poems achieve resolution. Most modern scholars find resolution in either Milton's privileging of one lifestyle over the other or in Milton's belief that each lifestyle has merits in its turn. Scholars seem to ignore the possibility that Milton finds no resolution between the two lifestyles, defending each but ultimately finding neither to be adequate.[21] Consider these lines from *L'Allegro* in which Milton describes this experience of poetry:

Lap me in soft Lydian airs,

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[19] "like yours, O Priest, when, glorious with sacred vestments in lustral water, you arise to go into the presence of the angry deities" (Hughes 52).
[20] See Greene, Cox, Zecharias, Fish.
[21] Wilson is a surprising exception (Wilson 34).

> Married to immortal verse,
> Such as the meeting soul may pierce
> In notes, with many a winding bout
> Of linked sweetness long drawn out, 140
> With wanton heed, and giddy cunning,
> The melting voice through mazes running;
> Untwisting all the chains that tie
> The hidden soul of harmony.

"Wanton heed and giddy cunning" provide an unusual paradox within the text of a poem on Mirth. "Wantonness" and "giddiness" seem likely candidates for membership in Mirth's parade, but "heed" and "cunning" belong to Melancholy more than Mirth. That poetry is meant to untwist the chains of harmony seems an unusual statement, particularly when describing "soft Lydian airs" which would typically do no more than reflect their pastoral landscape and tradition. These lines seem to capture Milton's conception of art, which introduces chaos to harmony, heed to wantonness, cunning to giddiness, paradox to straightforwardness, unresolved tension to seeming resolution.

Keeping this conception of art in mind, a second look at the companion poems suggests that Milton privileges neither the lifestyle of l'allegro or il penseroso. In fact, as in *Elegia Sexta*, Milton revels in the tension between, and not the unity of, the two lifestyles. He chooses to be neither the "bacchic reveler" nor the "poet-prophet"—he chooses rather to be that which untwists "all the chains that tie / The hidden soul of harmony." Written considerably before 1639, the ambivalent nature of Milton's defense of each lifestyle reflects the indecision he feels about his vocation and poetic inspiration. And the powerful impact of the poem comes not from the superbly constructed language or the intricately interwoven pattern of complements, but from the irresolvable tension between the two lifestyles. At the end of each poem, it is in this narrowly defined razor's edge tension that the narrator exists—inviting both Mirth and Melancholy to offer

him their lifestyles, but choosing neither and remaining suspended between the choices. Defending this indecisive suspension from deconstruction, Finch and Bowen write, "For if the blank space between *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* forms an abyss, a moment of pure suspension, the result is nevertheless as immeasurably meaningful as it is delightful" (12).

The powerful impact of *Elegia Sexta* and the companion poems originates in the irresolvable tension inherent in their arguments. I suggest that much of Milton's early poetry contains similar unresolved tension, often stemming from his vocational and inspirational indecision. Space does not allow a lengthy reading of all of Milton's early poetry in this light, but I present the following brief readings as subjects for further investigation.

The early sonnets (English and Italian) and the *Canzone* portray Milton as an experimenting love poet concerned about those voices, internal and external, which "make sport" and ask, "Perchè alle spalle tue soverchia soma?"[22] (12). These voices set up the tension between writing Italian love poetry and writing English epic. One on hand a resolution seems obvious in that these questions appear in the *Canzone* and he continues writing Italian love sonnets through *Sonnet VI*. This resolution crumbles, whoever, as the next poems he writes are Latin elegies (*Elegiae VI, VII*) and the English *The Passion*, both of which far remove themselves from the pastoral and love sonnet forms. The sonnets provide no resolution; both poet and reader find themselves suspended in the tension between Italian love poetry and English elegiac and epic poetry.

Ad Patrem hovers in the unresolved tension between Milton the student-priest, financially supported and expected to take Holy Orders, and Milton the student-poet, studying history and rhetoric to become a poet. Specifically Milton must explain how writing *A Mask* could possibly

[22] "Why the superfluous burden [of love poetry and foreign tongue] on your shoulders?" (Hughes 55)

coincide with his father's assumptions that Milton is using this time of independent study to prepare for the ministry (Parker 126).

The power of *Epitaph on the Marchioness of Windsor* surfaces in the inadequacy of poetic consolation in the face of the inexpressible grief of loss, and in the conflict Milton may have begun to feel between the necessity for human procreation and the cruel punishment often exacted by birth. Neither conflict finds an adequate resolution in the poem—the Marchioness must still die to become a Queen. Though the poem may be a replacement for the lost son, it can never *become* the lost son. The consolation is incomplete and we are left suspended between the need to console and the inadequacy of the consolation. The same can be said of *Lycidas* and *Epitaphium Damonis*—each remains suspended between the need for consolation and the poetry's inadequacy as consolation.

I suggest that the same irresolvable tension operates in Milton's mature work, reflecting not vocational or inspirational indecision but the dual nature of Milton's vision of himself as inspired prophet and inspired poet. As a brief example, God's creation of earth from Chaos provides irresolvable tension between natural chaos and divine order, a tension that can be resolved only through the destruction and redemption of the world at the second coming. Also, God's punishment of Adam and Eve's disobedience introduces the agony of childbirth and the ironic promise of redemption *through childbirth* in the arrival of the "heaven-rejecting" God. Again, this tension can be resolved only in the prophesied second coming, when a new heaven and a new earth are created.

I conclude this study with a personal statement. As I struggle to determine my own theology, my own beliefs, my own vocation, my own inspiration, I enter more and more irresolvable situations in which I exist, not in one extreme or another, but caught somewhere

between on the razor's edge. I find myself applying Milton's "wanton heed and giddy cunning" to more and more of my own actions—reckless abandon paradoxically ruled by reason. When Milton creates poetry that displays its impact in a lack of resolution, I think he defines more than his own lack of direction or his own indecisive nature—he recognizes and portrays the true human condition, caught between extremes but giving in to neither.

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