A Study of the Transition from the Spirit of the Renaissance to the Spirit of Puritanism in the Early Poems of John Milton

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A STUDY OF THE TRANSITION FROM THE SPIRIT OF THE
RENAISSANCE TO THE SPIRIT OF PURITANISM
IN THE EARLY POEMS OF JOHN MILTON

BY

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VITA AUCTORIS

Bernard John Dooley, S.J., was born in the city of Rochester, New York, July 28, 1924.

After his elementary education at St. Monica’s parish school, Rochester, he attended Aquinas Institute in the same city. He graduated from that High School in June, 1942. In February of the following year he entered the Novitiate of St. Isaac Jogues at Wernersville, Pennsylvania. For the first two years he spent there he was academically connected with Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. During the following two years he was enrolled with Woodstock College, Woodstock, Maryland.

In the autumn of 1946 he transferred to West Baden College of Loyola University, and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in June, 1948. He was then enrolled in the Graduate School of Loyola University, and remained a student in that school until 1949.
INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this thesis came from Stopford A. Brooke's *Milton*. He says:

"In its **Puritanism's** staid and pure religion, Milton's work had its foundation, but the temple he had begun to build upon it was quarried from the ancient and modern arts and letters of Greece, Italy and England. And filling the temple rose the peculiar incense of the Renaissance."

In this thesis I intend to prove that there is in the early poems of John Milton a transition from the spirit of the Renaissance to the spirit of Puritanism. The first two chapters will deal chiefly with the character of the spirit of these two ages. The following three chapters will be an attempt to show that the spirit of the Renaissance is to be found in the poems of the University period of Milton's life, while the spirit of Puritanism is to be found in the poems of the Horton period.

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CHAPTER I
THE SPIRIT OF THE RENAISSANCE

The spirit of the Renaissance is an intangible, elusive something. It may be more clearly represented in symbol than in strict definition. High up on the central ceiling of the vaulted Sistine Chapel is Michael Angelo's painting of the newly-created Adam. Adam stands free and emancipated, his body strong and unashamed, his arm stretched towards light and life. Adam is a symbol of the Renaissance. He typifies the movement which witnessed a revival of man's powers, a reawakening of the consciousness of himself and the universe. This was the movement which spread over Western Europe and may be said to have lasted over two centuries, from 1400 to 1600.

It is small wonder that the spirit of the Renaissance is an elusive concept, when not even our erudite historians tell us plainly what it is. For the most part they do not define the phrase at all; they simply use it, in a sense more or less fluctuating. Yet intelligent discussion demands a use which is firm and stable, a use based on definition. The formation of such a definition is the purpose of this chapter.

In formulating this definition three sources will be
investigated: definitions of the Renaissance by scholars, the history of the period, and the literature.

The definition of the Renaissance given in the Encyclopedia Britannica is this:

On the one hand it [the Renaissance] denotes the transition from that period of history which we call the Middle Ages to that which we call the modern. On the other hand it implies those changes in the intellectual and moral attitude of the Western nations by which the transition was characterized. If we insist on the literal and etymological meaning of the word, the Renaissance was a rebirth; and it is needful to inquire of what it was a rebirth. The metaphor of the Renaissance signifies the entrance of the European nations upon a fresh stage of vital energy in general, implying a fuller consciousness and freer exercise of faculties than belonged to the medieval period. Or it may mean the resuscitation of simply intellectual activities, stimulated by the revival of antique learning and its application to the arts and literature of modern peoples. The former of these definitions makes it denote the whole change which came over the European nations at the end of the Middle Ages. The other confines it to what was known as the Revival of Learning.¹

This definition distinguishes between the Renaissance and the Revival of Learning. The latter was merely one phenomena or symptom of a far wider and more comprehensive alteration in the

condition of Europe. There are other essential factors that go to make up the fabric of the Renaissance.

Important as the Revival of Learning undoubtedly was, there are essential factors in the complex called the Renaissance with which it can but remotely be connected. When we analyse the whole group of phenomena which have to be considered, we perceive that some of the most essential have nothing or little to do with the recovery of the classics. These are, briefly speaking, the decay of those great fabrics, The Church and the Empire, which ruled the Middle Ages, both as ideas and realities; the development of nationalities and languages; the enfeeblement of the feudal system through Europe; the invention and application of paper, the mariner's compass, gun powder and printing; the exploration of the continents beyond the seas; the substitution of the Copernican system of astronomy for the Ptolemaic.

From this definition two conclusions may be drawn: "the Renaissance, in the largest sense of the term, is the whole process of transition in Europe from the medieval to the modern order" and secondly, "the Revival of Learning, by which is meant more especially the resuscitated knowledge of classical learning, is the most potent and characteristic of the forces which operated in the Renaissance." Such a definition is helpful, but it can only suggest and connote the various phases and forces of that

2 Encyclopedia Britannica, XIX, 123.
evolution which brought into existence the modern world with its new conceptions of philosophy and religion, its reawakened arts and sciences, its firmer grasp on the realities of human nature and the world, its manifold inventions and discoveries, its altered political systems, its expansive and progressive forces. From the history and the literature of the period a deeper and more significant understanding of the spirit of the Renaissance will be acquired.

The Renaissance is essentially a transition from one historical stage to another, a transition from the medieval world to the modern world. Hence it is difficult to confine it within strict chronological limits. Historians generally place it within the years from 1400 to 1600. The Encyclopedia Britannica points to the year 1453 (the date of the fall of the city of Constantinople into the hands of the Turks) as the time when "the departure from the middle ages had been definitely and conspicuously made by the Italians." The half century between 1450 and 1500 marks the culmination of the Renaissance. During this period a Rubicon had been crossed from which no retrogression was possible. In 1530, the year of the pacification of Italy by Charles V, death came for the Renaissance in Italy, the country that had given it birth.

Historians designate three basic changes in the structure

4 Encyclopedia Britannica, XIX, 123.
of society which were effected by the Renaissance. They are the economic, social, and political modifications which influenced the life of the people and brought into existence the modern world.

Life during the Middle Ages had its economic foundations laid securely upon the life of the manor. The manor sought to be as self-sufficient as possible, providing everything that was needed for the life within its own walls. This was not a great problem since the economic system was based upon simple agriculture. Export and import were words of little significance in those days because trade with other manors was hardly known. This type of life was profoundly changed during the latter years of the Middle Ages and the early years of the Renaissance. Commerce and industry became a marked feature of life in the more advanced centers of Europe. Trade began to creep along the Mediterranean, then to the North over navigable rivers. Finally with the discovery of America, new markets were opened up to Europe. A tentative code of international law had to be established. Merchants banded together and formed partnerships on the basis of written contracts. This expanding trade powerfully stimulated the arts in the industrial fields. For the West to import the precious goods of the East, it would imperatively have to give equivalent goods of its own. Thus trade fostered industry. Industry caused the formation of guilds, the first industrial unions. "Serfdom and manorial economy tended to
disappear. A capitalistic society was emerging. An economic society of the first magnitude was accomplished. "5 The spirit seems to be one of gradual self-assertion on the part of individual effort. Men are moving away from the confining limits of the manor, breaking down the barriers of serfdom, and asserting their own personal freedom.

The economic transformation was complete. There were changes too in the social structure. During the Middle Ages, as has already been noted, men clustered about the manor, using that as the foundation of their society. Now they were moving away from the protective influence of the manorial lord to find freedom and independence in the towns which were quickly springing up in all parts of Europe.

Formerly the manor was the foundation of society. Its population was slight as compared with that of the towns which sprang up in large numbers. As commerce, industry, and the use of coined money progressed, these towns became more populous and wealthy. The center of social life shifted; it was no longer the manor, the nobleman's castle, or the Bishop's palace. Crowded and busy towns supported by trade and manufacture took their place. The age of the Renaissance was an age of towns and urban life.6

With the continuous growth of towns and the progressive social

6 Ibid. 3-4.
disequilibrium which that expansion entailed, the decay of the medieval world became open and palpable. No sooner was a town formed than it aspired to self-government and gained, in spite of opposition from the neighboring feudal lords, a measure of freedom which it was constantly at pains to increase. Men were moving away from the servitude under the feudal lords to a freedom that was to revolutionize the social currents of the history of the world.

Politics and religion contributed very much to the transformation of medieval thought. In politics men began to change their allegiance from the medieval manorial lord to the princes who ruled over the towns and cities.

Formerly princes and vassals managed the affairs of their states in a very simple manner. They did this personally much as they looked after payments received from their serfs. But toward the end of the Middle Ages this changed. The prevalence of coined money due to the growth of trade and industry enabled states to tax their subjects and to fill their treasuries with hard cash. This had been impossible in a purely manorial age. Townsmen usually supported their rulers because they disliked the turbulence of the nobility and their habit of fighting whenever they pleased. Princes therefore could count on their aid against the nobility, collect taxes from them with which to keep a standing army far more loyal than the old feudal levies, and pay corps of officials to administer laws and execute justice over nobles as well as peasants more fairly than before. Such rulers were absolute. They had been
suzerains; now they became sovereigns. Princes and states possessing such effective organizations were characteristic of the Renaissance.7

As in politics, so in religion grave changes were taking place. Man's desire for what he considered a personal freedom brought about unavoidable crises in the Church.

The Church which had been established during the Roman Empire possessed extensive political privileges and an enormous amount of land. It was a powerful political and economic competitor of princes. It had elaborated a vast system of dogma and enjoyed greater sway over the souls of men than did any other organization. To retain its ascendency in spiritual matters and retain leadership in political life was almost impossible during the closing Middle Ages. The Church could not ignore claims of secular life; neither could it subject the world completely to its conceptions; crises in religious life were unavoidable during the Renaissance.8

The greatest of these crises was the Reformation. During the Middle Ages the Church had been fired by a militant zeal for converts, and its kingdom had spread in triumph over the peoples of Europe. The Church of the later Middle Ages found that the problem was not to convert, but to serve and control the religious needs and habits of Christians in many nations. This new emphasis evoked an administrative system which, as it grew more

7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid., 50.
effective, became increasingly involved in political and material interests. Disputes with the national parties and rulers became frequent. This discord became open rebellion during the sixteenth century in what has been called the Protestant Reformation. The details of the revolt in terms of political history varied with the nations involved. German Protestantism, led by Martin Luther, moved by steps which were quite different from those of English Protestantism under Henry VIII. But in both cases the absolute sovereignty of a great institution which with its temporal and spiritual power might be likened to a sort of world state, was challenged.

The greatest fixed influence over human thought and conduct, unbroken in western Europe for over a thousand years, was defied. In England a state church was established with a monarch at its head. Throughout the sixteenth century differences grew in the Anglican church which eventually brought about the Civil War in the next century and finally resulted in the establishment of the numerous sects and sub-divisions of Protestantism. One of the essential interpretations of this shift from a centralized international religion with its central control over even the material forces of life, to a national church quarrelling among its dissenting, antagonistic sects, is that England had seized and amplified the opportunities for a more personal, individual understanding and use of religion. The individual saw in the
Reformation a chance to break the power of disciplined authority over his moral and spiritual life.

What has this historical survey shown of the spirit of the Renaissance? It has revealed the fact that the dominating note through these two hundred years had been one of emancipation. Men's thoughts, ideals, and aspirations seemed to expand with the expansion of their lives beyond the narrow confines of the feudal castle and with the expansion of the world beyond the seas. This spirit of emancipation had caused the death of feudalism, had given free play to the individual, and had undermined authority. The discovery of America and the obvious effect that it produced upon trade profoundly strengthened the natural desire in man for expansion and freedom. These outward events were the visible signs of a great motive power that grew from within. This power was the reassertion of nature and her rights. That emancipation is the dominant note of the Renaissance. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* attests to this.

In this article the Renaissance will be considered as implying a comprehensive movement of the European intellect and will toward self-emancipation, toward reassertion of the natural rights of reason and the senses, toward conquest of this planet as a place of human occupation, and toward the formation of regulative theories both for states and individuals differing from those of medieval times.9

9 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XIX, 123.
Secularism is a second tendency revealed in this historical survey. Formerly men had acted with a view to a life to come; now, although they did not forget entirely an eternal reward and punishment, they looked chiefly to the present world about them.

Men professed very ascetic ideals in the Middle Ages; to deny unduly the claims of society and the needs of the flesh was thought by many to be the highest moral attitude . . . . But this changed in the Renaissance. Man's outlook became more secular; it revolted against the view that the life beyond was more important than the things of this world . . . . Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin all broke with the other-worldly conceptions of the Middle Ages. This secular tendency . . . . produced Protestantism which shattered the unity of western civilization. 10

Hand in hand with the immense extension of the material world, effected by the voyages of discovery and the growth of towns, went an enlargement of the intellectual and aesthetic life of man, brought about by the revival of learning and the stimulation of the arts. This was a fertile period in the development of literature in England, Italy, Spain and France. During this time excellent lyric poetry was written. The drama was carried to its highest point of perfection in modern times by Lope de Vega and Calderon in Spain, by Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Jonson, and a host of others in England. Admirable long narrative poems were written by the Italians Aristo and Tasso,

10 Lucas, 5.
and by the Englishman Spenser. Camoens in Portugal wrote "Os Lusíades"; and "Paradise Lost", the greatest of the modern epics, was produced by John Milton. Cervantes, in his "Don Quixote", carried Spanish literature to its highest point. Perhaps the Frenchman Rabelais and the Englishman Marlowe reveal best the exuberance, the enthusiasm, the unfettered strength, the zest for life, the high spirit, which characterized this period when the old was cast aside by men who rejoiced in the new.

The spirit of this intellectual and literary revival is to be found in its cause, Humanism.

Humanism represents man's effort to define or realize his humanity as distinguished from his animality, on the one hand, and his divinity on the other . . . To the Renaissance, it was literature that counted centrally, as before it had been religion and afterwards was to be science. A whole age more or less consciously devoted its main energy to realizing, with the aid of classical literature, the idea of humanity.11

The soul of this humanistic movement was the inheritance, bequeathed from ancient times, of the Latin and Greek classics. In some favored parts of Europe, especially in northern Italy, this fine inheritance came to people who were keen, fresh, at the very threshold of finer development. This revival of antique letters brought about in these people a rebirth of intellect and

soul.

Humanism found its personification in one of its earliest devotees. The Italian Humanist, Francesco Petrarcha, began and carried forward the glorious development of Italian literature. In his native tongue he wrote poems of such excellence and beauty that they influenced the literature of his own country and of all western Europe. In his poems he turned away from many of the medieval conceptions of life. He looked to the positive aspect of Christianity rather than to the negative. He shrank from a meditation upon the abiding horror of sin and damnation. But he rejoiced in the reflection of God in the magnificence of the sea, in the majesty of the mountains, in the sparkle and flash of sunlight, in the beauty of the southern sky. In Petrarch and his coterie was developed the ideal of Humanism, the ideal of those deeply interested in man. "To the humanists the desire to learn, or rather the desire to learn classical letters, was apparently the clearest proof of man's humanity, his distinctive virtue."\(^{12}\) Petrarch prided himself upon the fine Latin style of his letters and of his poetical writings. In the old classical writings the Humanists saw beauty and perfection of form and for this reason they sought a development of a finer Latin scholarship and of a knowledge of the writings of the masters of old.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 9.
The Humanists discovered many philosophies in their study of ancient manuscripts. But that which appealed most strongly to their minds was the idealism of Plato.

It is not difficult to understand the ardent devotion of the men of the Renaissance to Plato. Aristotle was coupled with scholasticism, with the submission of the human intellect to external authority. Plato appeared to them as the prophet of freedom, as the philosopher to whom, more than to anyone else, was due their emancipation from the fetters of Aristotelian scholasticism. He spoke to them of the mystery of life, he corresponded to the new instincts that stirred within them, to the new vision that floated before their eyes, to the imaginative yearnings that filled their hearts. The way in which Plato fused the material and the immaterial world had for them an unfailing fascination. Moreover their temperaments were naturally Platonic. So they turned to Plato with passionate devotion.13

The literature of the Renaissance was not bereft of all religion. Interest had shifted from an eternal world to a material world, but the literature remained deeply religious. Hence it acquired that profounder interest, that enduring significance which makes it live for us today. There is a religious note in Ben Jonson and Fulke Greville, in Southwell and Wotton, and in Dekker and Shirley. Walter Raleigh and Spenser are evangelical. Yet the greatest part of this literature is not strictly

religious. Still it is full of spiritual force which gives it weight, of passion which is the religion of the heart. The sixteenth century lyrics breathe forth goodness rather than virtue, worship rather than observance. In these poems there is a sense of permanence. It is present in Wyatt's early work and in Shakespeare's sonnets. There are lines whose white hot heat still has power to burn, as it always will.

It may be concluded from this study of the literature of the Renaissance that the writing of this period was inspired by a spirit of expression. This spirit was something new. It was a clearer and more wonderful perception of beauty, a strange, fierce joy in beauty, a more enlightened and critical spirit, a disposition to question authority (as the Greeks would have done) and to seek rational causes, a desire, finally, to know and understand and to express these newly-found feelings and knowledge in picturesque language. In the Middle Ages expression in words had been chiefly a matter of narrative and symbol, prescribed mostly by tradition. If personal force pierced through, it was only accidental when men with exceptional gifts happened to be employed. But during the Renaissance men had become more conscious of themselves and of the world. They awakened to a sense of the beauty which kindled emotion. Expression was sought and found.

From this survey of the history and the literature of the
Renaissance, a definition may be formed of the spirit of this age. It was a spirit of emancipation and freedom, of expression, of exuberant gaiety and imaginative freedom, of religious and scientific inquiry.

The contrasts in the life of the good Saint Francis of Assisi are symbolic of the contrasts between the Medieval Age and the Renaissance. An extraordinarily pure and simple soul, he gave his life wholeheartedly to Christ and founded one of the great orders of the Church, the Brothers Minor or the Franciscans. In these respects he moved within the frame of the ascetic concepts of the Middle Ages; but because he sent his friars not into monastic solitude but out into the world to serve their suffering fellowmen, and further because he rejoiced with the simple pleasure of a child or poet in the countless fair forms of nature, calling beasts his brothers and the birds his sisters, he was on the way toward an affirmation of existence that was essentially modern.
CHAPTER II

THE SPIRIT OF PURITANISM

Anyone who has studied the changes and variations of Puritan political and religious theory and practice will realize the difficulty of generalizing about the various aspects of this movement. Every author and scholar who voices an opinion about this period of history proposes a theory that seems to be a contradiction of what some former scholar had regarded as the true spirit of Puritanism.

To one observer the Puritan movement was the spearhead of liberty and democracy, to another it seemed the embodiment of repression and tyranny. There is the familiar story of the four blind men who touched different parts of the elephant and came to widely varying conclusions as to the nature of the animal. As a matter of fact, the four blind men in this case, the scholars of the period, might very easily justify their various views. In strict accuracy there were many Puritan spirits since it differed so greatly at different periods of its history. But despite this changing complexity and variability, an attempt may be made to abstract from the multiplicity of conflicting elements those fundamental characteristics which all the
authorities have found to contribute their part in constituting the spirit of the Puritan Age.

In this inquiry four main sources will be dealt with: definitions given by scholars, the history of the movement, the inner spirit of the religion, and the literature produced by Puritan writers.

All authors admit that a definition of Puritanism is difficult to formulate. Samuel Eliot Morison in his book, The Builders of the Bay Colony, although admitting that it is a disagreeable task, makes a bold attempt.

Puritanism was a way of life based on the belief that the Bible was the word of God. Puritans were the Englishmen who endeavored to live according to that light . . . that party of English Protestants who wished to carry out the Reformation to its logical conclusion, and purge the Anglican Church of forms and ceremonies for which there was no warrant in the Bible. ¹

This definition is valuable since it indicates the real purpose for which the Puritan religion had been founded: to purify the Anglican church of the seemingly unnecessary accidentals that it had inherited from the Roman Catholic Church. The Bible had become the sole rule. The definition that is given in the

Catholic Encyclopedia is of much more critical value, since it enumerates more definite characteristics of the movement.

It is hard to frame an exact definition capable of including the varied and sometimes mutually inconsistent forms of belief usually classified under that name. In its original meaning it signified all those "who strove for a worship purified from all taint of popery." A more recent writer expands this definition: "the many sects and persons who fall under this definition were usually characterized both by an aversion from gaiety and a passionate love of civic freedom."

There are two important characteristics to note here: aversion from gaiety and a passionate love of civic freedom.

The beginnings of English Puritanism can first be seen in the Vestiarian Movement in 1563. This was an opposition to "the use of the cap and gown by the clergy in the daily life and of the surplice in the Church." Vestments and rites were only the beginning of a controversy which was to end in a dispute about policy concerning much more important matters. This would ultimately result in the emergence of Presbyterianism in antagonism to Episcopalianism. The Puritans had acquired an utter disregard for the ancient tradition and outward observance of the Church from Calvin. He had taught them a special system of doctrine and discipline in which the heart and

3 Ibid., 382.
soul were sustained by the intellectual appreciation of theological truth.

It will be sufficient in this historical survey to mention the result of the various struggles into which the Puritan entered to establish his freedom. The result is this: the three different theories of Church government that developed along divergent lines during the subsequent years.

1) There were the moderates who were willing to retain government by the Bishops, though they preferred the title of "superintendent", but who wished the uses of the Establishment to conform more nearly to the Genevan practices. Those who held this system were in agreement with the Scottish Presbyterianism which had been established by John Knox.

2) There were the strict Presbyterians who wished for the Calvinistic form of government as well as the theology and order of worship. In England the movement was led by Thomas Cartwright of Cambridge, whose doctrine that there should be equality of authority and that the presbyter and the bishop were all one was adopted by the Scots.

3) There were the Free Churchmen or Independents who repudiated all coercive power in the Church and wished all men to be free in forming congregations. Their leader was Robert Brown, whose descendants grew in power and authority until under Cromwell they became the predominant party. 4

The results of Puritanism are also listed by the same author.

4 Ibid., 581.
The results of Puritanism as common to these three bodies lay in the results effected by the general study of the Bible, in which the Puritans learned the relations of man with God as exemplified in the histories and parables of Holy Writ. This private study of the Bible was carried on by the aid of private interpretation which inevitably led to the formation of minor sects. Thus Protestantism in the Puritan form could never attain a recognized dogmatic system. The lack of consistent theology was less felt because of the great stress which the Puritans laid "serving God in Spirit and Truth" - by feeling and conduct rather than by doctrine.5

We may add here a further note to the spirit of Puritanism. Although the Puritan founded his entire religion upon the Bible, he never had any consistent dogmatic system. He was guided by feeling and conduct rather than by any elaborate system of theology.

Puritanism was primarily a religious movement. So an inquiry into the religion of the Puritan is necessary. The salvation or damnation of the individual was the central theme of this religion. At the outset a person was "elected" by God to be a believer. Then he proceeded to sanctification and justification through preaching, fasting, and a strict standard of moral discipline. The conversion of the neophyte was followed by a striving for strong intellectual faith since "the best

5 Ibid., 582
fruits of a good moral life were reprehensible if not done in faith. But there was much more to traveling the narrow road than mere intellectual belief.

One must next renounce and repent of every known sin. He must study God's requirements as set forth in the Bible, realizing his short-comings, and "rip up" his heart in genuine penitence. Not only the present life, but all the past must be dragged into the white light of conscience, dissected and examined with a determination to overlook no slightest failing or secret desire. When the depth of his iniquity became apparent . . . the penitent reached a state of holy desperation . . . cast himself wholly on the mercy of God. Then came the peace that passeth all understanding, the definite assurance of salvation.

In addition to faith, good works were indispensible, since the reality of faith was known by the fruits of faith. These good works were not done in order to earn merit, since they could not earn anything from God. In theory they were done only for God's glory. They were not a meritorious cause, but a sure evidence of the individual's genuine conversion.

Knappen points out that these good works were chiefly subjective:

Roving fantasies or light thoughts were to be jealously weeded out of his mind.

7 Ibid., 393.
A good meditation was to be cherished above rubies. Mystical themes were seldom chosen, but thoughts on God, the believer's relation to him, the plan of salvation, the past conduct of the believer and resolutions to do better . . . the ability to pray fervently, frequently and at length, a humble, contented spirit; the power to communicate spiritual attitudes to others - all ranked high among the Puritan objectives.8

In addition to these contemplative works there were duties of the active life, but the former were always more important. The latter included obedience to superiors, love of neighbor, and works of charity.

In the Puritan code of morality the heart was of much more importance than the intellect. "The seat of faith is not in the brain, but in the heart, and the head is not the place to keep the promises of God, but the heart is the chest to lay them up in."9 The Puritan worthy was proud of his ability to shed tears on occasion and saw nothing embarrassing about talking about the sweet joy in his religious contemplation. Psalm singing and sermons made a powerful appeal to the Puritan senses.

They experienced emotional outbursts and they spent time in contemplation, but their morality was of a practical sort which

8 Ibid., 396-397.
9 Ibid., 306.
joined head and heart in a relationship of mutual leadership and restraint ... But when convenient he abandoned reason for emotion ... he disciplined his emotions by the twin yokes of Theological dogma and ruling elders. When he meditated he contemplated not the Heavenly City or the Blessed Virgin but himself and his own conduct. 10

The moral standard was formidable in the extreme since all acts were considered to be moral and since one was never free from ethical considerations. The Puritan was forever conscious that there would be a sure and searching judgment in which an account would have to be given for every idle word and for every aimless action. This fear of a final day of judgment was carried to such an extreme that the zealot jealously suspected himself even of unknown sins in this drastic demand for a pure conscience.

The external manifestation of this conscience was zeal, a burning desire for personal perfection and communal perfection. His white-hot feelings of self-righteousness made of the Puritan a prophet in his generation who rebuked high and low alike. The assumed responsibility for the salvation of his brethren made the Puritan speak out with a courageous directness. The Puritan feeling for his neighbor led him to retain the ideas of an established church and persecution for heresy.

10 Ibid., 342.
He demanded a voice in the governing of his church and his brethren.

At this point two generalizations seem justifiable. First, the Puritan was entirely absorbed in God. He yearned to know Him, to serve Him, and especially to enjoy Him. This vision of God had a definite effect on the Puritan character. It made him individualistic. He was taken up with his acts of abasement, penance, gratitude. Secondly we might say that the Puritan looked to the commonweal. For his own people he desired freedom and independence in both political and religious affairs. After having contemplated the most High God, all distinctions between men disappeared. The nobles and priests were looked down upon with contempt. All men were equal and all men should be free.

Anyone who desires to know the spirit of Puritanism and what it came to mean, cannot ignore the literature of the period. From 1570 when Thomas Cartwright was expelled from the University of Cambridge until 1643 when the Westminster Assembly was called, the Puritan reformers were checked in their plans for reorganizing the Church. During that period of delay, they devoted themselves to the production of literature. It will not be surprising to note that the great bulk of this literature was religious. Completely absorbed as the Puritan was in his first conversion and in his ultimate conversion in the
heavenly Jerusalem, it is only natural that he should talk and write about himself as one chosen by God to bear witness to the grace that God had given to him. He must put his abilities to work in the spirit of faith for the glory of God.

Puritan literature was religious in varying degrees. The strictly religious literature was the sermon. Preaching was for the Puritan divine a natural carrying on of the holy endeavor to popularize the sacred Book. He taught his people to understand it and to apply its lessons. The style and subject matter of these sermons varied at different times. In the very early works of the divines we read sermons about the fires of Hell, the terrible wrath of God the Avenger. But in the later years when the preachers had gained experience in dealing with the problems of their people, they learned that their chief concern must be to build up the courage and self-confidence of the people. The preacher may have overstressed the suffering of the damned, but he did not forget to urge as vigorously as possible upon his people the realization of the rewards of faith and a good life. Thus it would be to misrepresent the Puritan preacher completely if he were pictured as the ranting, bombastic declaimer. He was also the shepherd of his flock.

The preaching of the Puritan was simple. That was its chief characteristic.
The primary rules of this democratic rhetoric of the spirit were to be found in the fourteenth chapter of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. "Let all things be done unto edifying," says the Apostle. To be able to speak tongues is good, but "except ye utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how shall it be known what is spoken"?

In plainness and simplicity the preacher found a great power over the minds of his hearers. He was quite prepared to use any means to his end, but the end was to make everyone feel the force and reality of what he was saying. Therefore he tried to avoid whatever appeared to be of an aristocratic culture, while creating in his audience the pride of possessing what he felt to be a truer culture.

This desire for simplicity found many means of expression in the sermons. There should be no learned allusions that the common people would not understand. Yet this did not mean a colorless and prosaic style. It was plain, not in that it was unimaginative, but in that it was designed to be intelligible and moving to plain people. The preacher used colorful similes, metaphors, allegories, symbols, dialogues, fables, beast-tales, and exempla. But these came, not from the Latin and Greek authors of antiquity, but from the lives of the people.

11 Ibid., 130.
The most popular figure to the Puritan imagination was that in which he saw the life of the spirit as a pilgrimage and a battle. The sermons of the period were full of this figure. The church-goer was told that his soul was a traveler through a strange country. He was a traveler, who, fleeing from destruction, must adhere through peril and hardship to the way that leads home. Warfare demanded soldiers. The spiritual struggle must be one of militant, active warfare on the part of the individual against his own weakness.

The second type of literary composition is closely linked with the sermon. This is the work of the "affectionate practical English writers." They did with their pens what the preacher did in the pulpit. Richard Greenham, John Dod, Arthur Hildersam, Henry Smith, and Richard Rogers were only a few of these.

These writers were called practical because they taught men to believe and how to act. They were called affectionate because they appealed to men's emotions through the imagination. . . . Their aim was to arouse every man to ask himself the ancient question which the keeper of the prison asked of Paul and Silas: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Biographical and historical writings made a special appeal to the Puritan mind and took from Puritanism a special

12 Ibid., 25
character. The hagiographers told the lives of the saints, not so much that they might be venerated, but in order that men might have an example of what the good life should be. Haller quotes Richard Baxter's views on this type of literature.

Baxter commends history much as humanist critics like Sidney had praised poetry for being "useful and delightful". "Young people before they can read much of theological treatises with understanding or delight are inclined by nature to enjoy the reading of history." But Baxter does not mean such histories as recount the conquests of Alexander "where there be much stir to little purpose till the play be ended." Rather he means "the report of one soul's conversion to God, and the reformation of one family, city, or church, and the noble operations of the blessed spirit, by which he brings up souls to God, and conquers the world, the flesh and the devil."13

Almost every Puritan kept his own personal diary, a journal of his transactions with God and the devil. The diary became for him a substitute for the confessional.

The prose of this period is for the most part religious. Some is political and historical. A little is philosophical. It is not of first-rate importance. Almost without exception it is heavy and solid, lacking in brevity, simplicity and easy expression. Milton was an outstanding prose writer, but his

13 Ibid., 101
prose is often characterized by animus rather than by reason, and it shows a spirit of controversy rather than of restraint. He is criticised for his endless haggling over scriptural authority. He is condemned for the seeming joy he takes in heaping ridicule and abuse upon his opponents. But the prose works at their best constitute a vital and permanent contribution to literature and thought.

There are passages of irony, denunciation, or comic exaggeration in the prose as unforgettable as the parallel outbursts which occasionally found their way into the poetry, and they are an equally authentic expression of Milton's genius. It remains true, however, that the controversial writing is most valuable when it is least controversial.14

Yet the most popular prose work of the period was not written by Milton. It is John Bunyon who holds this distinction with his Pilgrim's Progress. Unlike Milton he is not choked with scholarly allusions and erudition. His stories are simple, realistic, rugged and native. This was because the only learning that Bunyon possessed was his deep acquaintance with the Bible. If he had merely been a skilful expositor of the Puritan theology, he would have been lost amid the hundreds of other controversial writers of the times. But he took his theological doctrines and clothed them with a narrative form and style that

no controversialist could approach. His allegory is the great Puritan vision expressed in mundane terms.

The great bulk of the poetry of the period is to be found in the sermons. The preachers used poetry to arouse emotions and to conceal the use of dialectics. The preacher found that the use of poetry was a sure method of winning his hearers. Today we would hardly call this poetry in the strict sense, but it had many of the elements necessary for true poetry. It is the common opinion that beauty, good taste, high literary culture, and especially high poetry can never be associated with the Puritan temper and way of life. This is why Milton seems to many to be an enigma, an enemy in the camp of the Philistines. But Milton never admits this war between poetry and Puritanism. Milton was an enthusiastic Puritan. He had dedicated himself entirely to the Puritan God and he never wavered in his adherence to that God. In his own mind he was just another recruit in the warfare of the spirit, another pilgrim traveling the road to the New Jerusalem.
CHAPTER III

THE POEMS OF THE UNIVERSITY PERIOD REVEALING

THE SPIRIT OF THE RENAISSANCE

John Milton is justly referred to as the "Poet of Puritanism" since it was in the religion of the Puritan that he found the inspiration for the expression of his poetical genius. But it was not always so. In the very early poems there is a definite trace of the spirit of the Renaissance. Stopford A. Brooke, in his Milton, attests to this.

In its [Puritanism's] staid and pure religion Milton's work had its foundation, but the temple he had begun to build upon it was quarried from the ancient and modern arts and letters of Greece, Italy, and England. And filling the temple rose the peculiar incense of the Renaissance."

It will be well to note at the very beginning that the predominant note of these poems is that of the Renaissance, but it is not exclusively so. The incense filling the temple is that of the Renaissance, but it is not to be forgotten that the foundation of the temple is Puritanism.

The poems in which the influence of the Renaissance is

1 Brooke, 19.
most deeply felt are those that Milton wrote before his composition of "L'Allegro", which was around 1629. These would include many of the Latin poems, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity", "Vacation Exercise", "On Time", "At a Solemn Musick", "Song on a May Morning", "The Passion", "Upon the Circumcision", and "On Shakespeare". I have selected these poems as the ones which reflect most perfectly the spirit of the Renaissance.

It will be well to begin this study with an analysis of the Latin poems since they were some of Milton's earliest works. Another important reason for studying these poems is, as Hanford says, because they "constitute an immensely important year-by-year record of Milton's thoughts, feelings, and literary development." It is in these poems that we first begin to detect the spirit of the Renaissance.

It will be remembered that the Renaissance Humanist prided himself on his Latin poetical style, on the knowledge he possessed of the classical writings. Milton attained such excellence in this field that his biographer, Masson, maintains that as a youth of seventeen he far excelled the young Virgil who wrote "Ciris" at the same age. John Milton was following in the humanistic tradition during these early years at the university.

2 Hanford, 134.
The spirit of these Latin poems is the spirit of exuberant gaiety and imaginative freedom. Milton seems to want to drown himself in the legitimate pleasures of sense, to touch and smell and hear everything that is sweet and beautiful in nature. An example might be his seventh Elegy, "In adventum Veris". Spring had always been a favorite topic with the Latins. Horace, Ovid, and Vergil had written of the Spring: the melting snows, the launching of the ships, the plowmen going to the fields, the birds returning to their haunts, and the earth adorning herself once again with verdure and flowers. In the Spring amorous feelings rise up in the youthful swain as he is smitten with Cupid's dart.

It is Spring and the light streaming over the topmost roofs of the village had ushered in the first of May . . . . One by chance I noticed who surpassed the others, and that glance was the beginning of my ills. Like her even Venus might wish to appear to mortals; fair like her must the queen of the gods have been. Mischievous Cupid, mindful of his threat, cast her in my path; he alone laid the snare for me. Not far off lurked the crafty god himself with the mighty weight of his torch and his many arrows on his back. Without a moment's loss he clung to the eyelids, then to the mouth of the maiden; thence in he darted between her lips, then settled on her lips; and wherever the nimble archer flitted, alas! from a thousand points he wounded my defenseless breast. Forthwith strange passions assailed my breast. The fire of love within consumed me; I was all aflame. Meanwhile she was my only pleasure; in misery
was she snatched from me to return no more. 3

Throughout these poems there is the style of the Latins, which is also the style of the humanistic poets of the Renaissance. But more important than this the spirit of the two is the same. It is the spirit that runs through all the Horatian Odes, the worldly spirit of the humanists, the spirit of the "Carpe diem". Although nature renews itself, death is for us the end of all; let us then enjoy our brief span of years. Closely connected with this spirit is his expression of delight in sensuous beauty and in thoughts of love. In the first Elegy he reveals an enthusiasm for the life of cultured and studious leisure; in "Ad Patrem" he tells of his gratitude to his father for providing him with generous opportunities of indulging in such tastes. In "Mansus" he expresses his pride in his association with a famous Italian patron of art. These personal expressions of his feelings, ambitions, desires during the University and Horton periods reveal a spirit that is unmistakably the spirit of the Renaissance.

Do these poems reveal the true character of John Milton? The point has long been a source of much discussion. Some critics see in them mere literary scholastic exercises, full of cold logic and false mythological allusions. But the majority

opinion is to the contrary. In his introduction to the Latin poems, MacKeller agrees with Saurat and Hanford on this point.

What the Latin poems especially reveal of Milton’s character is more readily perceptible. Here are all the high qualities of mind and spirit regarded as pre-eminently Miltonic. But if we could find nothing more, the poems would confirm the common view that Milton from first to last was highly serious, that all his life he was stern and unbending, devoid of humor and the lighter graces. It is precisely this false view that the Latin poems correct. There is in them much more than a high seriousness; there are grace, geniality, and fun and a frank admission of his susceptibility to the tender emotions. It is the supposedly sober young Puritan who, under the acknowledged tutelage of Ovid, wrote that breath-taking poem, the seventh Elegy, in which he almost outdoes Ovid in his own art.4

These characteristics which the young poet reveals, the intense susceptibility to feminine charm, the marvelous sympathy with nature “in which he feels and recognizes immense forces of well-nigh voluptuous desire,”5 his exquisite sensibility to the most insignificant expression of beauty, his gaiety — these are the characteristics of the young Milton and they are also the characteristics of the man of the Renaissance.

In the same gay, laughing mood as the Latin poems,

4 Ibid., 17.
5 Denis Saurat, Milton Man and Thinker, Dial Press, New York, 1925, 8.
"On a May Morning" is a lovely lyric sung to welcome the month of May. It is at the altar of the goddess of May that Milton wishes to worship because she fills his life with the joy and good feelings that he desires:

Hail Bounteous May that dost inspire
Mirth and youth, and warm desire,
Woods and groves are of thy dressing,
Hill and dale, doth boast thy blessing.6

Written in the classic Jonsonian tradition, this poem is another witness to the spirit of the Renaissance that dominated the early character of John Milton.

We meet now the first of Milton's long line of religious poems. This is not unusual in the case of the zealous young Puritan. Neither is it inconsistent to find the young man of the Renaissance writing such poetry. "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" is a product of the spirit of the Renaissance which filled John Milton during these early years at the University.

In the Sixth Elegy, an epistle to an intimate college friend, Milton tells of his reason for composing this poem. It is a song sung to the peace-bringing King. This poem was begun before daylight on Christmas morning as a birthday gift to the Christ Child.

6 Student's Milton, "On a May Morning", ll. 5-8, 21.
There is a deeply religious mood here, which is in no way inconsistent with the Renaissance Milton. Although the Humanists had studied very thoroughly the pagan authors of antiquity, and although they had allowed a certain secularism to creep into their thought and writings, they had not sought a complete emancipation from religion. Much of their writing was intensely religious, but their Christianity was colored with the classical learning of the ancients.

The source for this poem's inspiration was, of course, the narration of the Nativity scene in St. Luke's Gospel. The child is there in the manger wrapped in swaddling clothes, the Virgin Mary with him, the Magi hastening to give him homage, the shepherds in rustic row upon the lawn, and the angel choirs singing out their exultant alleluias. St. Luke's description of the scene, though brief, is warm and tender. There is none of this warmth in Milton's work. As Mark Pattison says, "The ode, not withstanding its foretaste of Milton's grandeur, abounds in frigid conceits . . . . The ode is frosty, as written in winter within the four walls of a college chamber."\(^7\) The Reformation had taken the heart out of Christianity and the religious writings of the Renaissance suffered accordingly. The coldness of this poem comes not from the original source, but from two secondary sources. Tasso's "Rime Sacre" in which the cessation

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of the oracles and the overthrow of the pagan deities of Greece and Egypt are described is the first of these sources. This poem is very similar to Milton's description of how the old dragon brood will be shorn of its power and prestige in the day of judgment when the glory of Christ, which is begun at the Nativity, will reach its apex. Then all the pagan gods and oracles will mourn and fly and flees away, and the Virgin will lay her Babe to rest. The second source is Virgil's fourth eclogue which prophesied the golden age of Rome which was to follow upon the birth of a son to Pollio. "This eclogue is universally interpreted as an allegory on the birth of Christ." Steeped as Milton was in the pagan literature of the ancients, this young student of the Renaissance sought to garb his Christian thought in the classic beauty he knew so well.

Crashaw and Southwell in their beautiful nativity odes catch some of the simplicity and charm of St. Luke, but Milton "does not escape from the Renaissance habit of employing classical modes of conception for his Christian theme." At some of the fantastic conceits of the poem, our sensibilities are shocked. It is hard for us to accept the traditionally Renaissance appellation of the Christ Child, Pan, the shepherd god. Apollo, the Oracles, Peor, Baalim, Isis, Orus, the Anubis seem to have no

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8 Hanford, 142.
9 Ibid., 142
place in the Christian stable of Bethlehem. The poem has a unique charm with its commingling of Christianity and classicism. But the stately conceits, the quaintness, the extravagance are of the Renaissance tradition.

Two other religious poems must be mentioned at this point. They are "The Passion" and "Upon the Circumcision". Stopford Brooke says simply that they are failures. The man was not yet prepared to devote himself to the high ambition to which he had consecrated himself in 1629. Certainly "The Passion" is a failure. Milton himself left the poem unfinished and appended a note to the effect that he found it above the years he had when he wrote it. Tillyard indicates precisely where Milton failed.

In "The Passion", Milton attempts to re-capture and, in accordance with the more tragic theme, to deepen the mood that prompted the "Nativity Ode". The failure is complete. It is full of conceits as the earlier poem; but these call dreadful attention to themselves; puerility has supplanted youthfulness.

The second of these two poems, "Upon the Circumcision", is a further attempt on the part of Milton to deal with matters that pertained directly to his dedication. Hanford is not enthusiastic about it. He says that Milton is forcing himself.

to meditate upon the significance of a theme that has for him no more than a conventional appeal.

The failure of these two poems may very well be attributed to the fact that Milton was in the mood of his earlier Renaissance verse. The subjects had little romantic appeal and the religious aspect of them did not seem to interest the poet. The emotion, though intense, does not seem to be personal. Milton realised that his interests were, for the time being, in this world and not in the world to come. He had not reached the maturity necessary to write religious poetry with deep personal feeling. He must content himself with writing poetry that was distinctive of the Renaissance, poetry full of spiritual force, yet not directly and perceptibly religious.

Milton found success in the poems "On Time" and "At a Solemn Musick". They are not strictly religious poems, but they have a deep spiritual significance. They are more in accord with the spirit of the Renaissance.

"On Time" is in the form of an inscription. Here Milton is not trying to express in poetic imagery a personal religious emotion. Rather he has a thought which is real, sincere, and deep, but more universal than his thoughts on the Passion and the Circumcision. Milton had not as yet matured spiritually, but he is tending toward the final spiritual development that
he will reach as a Puritan poet in later years. Despite his sincere avowal to serve God in everything he does, he has been too much engrossed in the literature of the ancients, in the possibility of finding beauty and gratification in this mortal life, in the exuberant gaiety and imaginative freedom of his earlier works, to write successfully of a personal God and of his relations with that God. For the time he must content himself with a treatment of religious truths that is general and impersonal. This is in accord with the strict tradition of the Renaissance.

"At a Solemn Musick" has deep spiritual significance. It is an example of the consummate skill of the author in wedding the sense of the poem to the sound of the words and phrases. The first sixteen lines are an ecstatic description of the "Cherubick host" and their heavenly music. A complete contrast is found in the succeeding lines in which, in sober couplets, is described the answer that the sin-despoiled world gives to this celestial music. The last four lines constitute a prayer that the heavenly and earthly music may once again be in harmony.

There are in this poem two outstanding reflections of the Renaissance influence on the work of Milton. First, the poet shows his enthusiasm for music, a distinctive characteristic of the Renaissance man. He is a man who enjoys the things of sense, the sonorous organ rolls, the "saintly shout
and solemn Jubily", "That undisturbed Song of pure concnet." The form of this poem too is especially well adapted to give the effect of music. "The poetic form he has chosen, one long continuous sentence . . . is suited to the content and organ music, the effect of which he is trying to give."

"At a Solemn Musick" bears witness to a second influence of the Renaissance upon the work of Milton. The philosophy of the Renaissance had been the philosophy of Plato. The humanists of that period had turned to Plato with passionate devotion. John Milton was an ardent disciple of Plato during these early years. He attests to this in the Apology for Smectymnuus:

Thus from the laureate fraternity of poets, riper years and the ceaseless round of studies led me to the shady spaces of philosophy; but chiefly to the divine volumes of Plato.12

This poem bears witness to Milton's enthusiasm for the "sphere-born harmonious sisters of voice and verse," a Platonic concept. Hanford says that this concept of the music of the spheres is deeply characteristic of Milton's thought. At some time previous to the writing of this poem, while the poet was still at Cambridge, he wrote an academic exercise on the music of the spheres, De Sphaerarum Concentu. The origin of this doctrine

11 Patterson, Student's Milton, Notes, 48.  
12 Ibid., 549.
on the music of the spheres is Plato's *Timaeus* and *Republic*. According to Plato, the sun, the moon, the five planets, and the heaven of the fixed stars, were each tenanted by a Siren, who, singing in a monotone its own proper note, formed a scale or octave. The octave had its counterpart in the immortal soul of each person. "Were it not for the earthly and perishable nature of the body, our souls would sound in perfect accord with the soul of the world." This Platonic doctrine was a favorite with the philosophers and poets of the Renaissance. It is the source for the inspiration of "At a Solemn Musick". It is another instance of the Renaissance influence on the early work of John Milton.

Perhaps the clearest expression of Milton's admiration of the spirit of the Renaissance is his tribute to the greatest of the Renaissance poets, William Shakespeare. When the second folio edition of Shakespeare's plays was published in 1632, Milton's poem, "An Epitaph on the Admirable Dramaticke Poet W. Shakespeare", appeared in the preface. It had been written two years previously when Milton was twenty-two years old.

This poem reveals the author's sincere admiration for the great dramatist. In fact, as Tillyard says, "Milton's praise is extremely reverential, far more so than the politeness

of a verse tribute absolutely demanded." At St. Paul's, at Cambridge, and during his Horton days, he had read and reread the plays of Shakespeare, and with each rereading he imbibed more of the spirit of the Renaissance. In his unreserved praise of the greatest of the Renaissance poets, John Milton bears witness to the kindred spirit that lies within his own mind and heart. He too in those early days was a poet of the Renaissance.

14 Tillyard, Milton, 50
CHAPTER IV
POEMS OF DECISION

The beautiful pair of lyrics, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso", mark a distinctive turning point in the early poems of John Milton. Before the writing of these, his poetry had all the characteristics of the Renaissance. The poetry which followed them is definitely the poetry of a man who had fallen completely under the influence of the Puritan religion. These two poems stand at the midway point, a point at which the poet must come to a decision as to which one of the two influences he will allow to dominate his future life and work.

The date of the writing of these poems was formerly conjectured to be after 1632 at some period during his stay at Horton. Internal evidence has now persuaded scholars to refer them to some time during the University career. Tillyard is specific in dating the poems in the long vacation of 1631.

The motive of Milton in writing these poems has been discussed at great length by many Milton scholars. Hanford considers these two lyrics as "parallel pictures of contrasting moods," as "contrasting movements in a musical composition" with no deeper significance than any other exercise which he wrote during his university career. Tillyard, after discovering
striking parallels with the First Prolusion, Whether Day or Night is more excellent, also considers the pieces to be merely a poetical exercise on a single theme with both sides represented.

However it is to be doubted whether Milton himself viewed the poems in this light. It seems more probable that he looked upon them as representatives of opposing camps in a moral battle that was being waged in his own soul. The outcome was to be an ethical resolution that would influence his whole future life.

Hanford provides the first reason for the present interpretation.

We know that he was much given to weighing and considering the choices which lay before him with reference to the fulfillment of his hopes and expectations of himself. 1

In his first "Elegy", to Charles Diodoti, after enumerating the sensuous joys of the countryside about Horton, he takes a solemn pledge to flee from the ill-famed halls of treacherous Circe and to return to the rush-grown marshes of the Cam. In the sixth "Elegy" he considers two different types of poetry, the gay, trivial poetry and the solemn, sober, more purposeful poetry.

1 Hanford, Handbook, 150.
After giving both types adequate consideration, he pledges his life to the more sober type and promises to prepare himself for this writing by a life of rigid self-denial, drinking "only sober draughts from a pure spring." It was certainly in agreement with other expressions of Milton's character that he should make of these poems a means of expressing a moral problem that existed in his mind.

Saurat's character analysis of Milton shows him a man of firm principle who reasoned out his life ahead of time.

No doubt there came first his hatred of all compromise when ideal is at stake, the clear, hard domination of intelligence over passion; but there comes also pride, as a sense of his own worth which is not to be degraded; Milton thinks so highly of his reason, has such trust in his intellect, that he wants his reason to be mistress absolute in himself. He takes himself too seriously to allow passion to rule in him.²

For a man of such a temperament and character, it would have been natural to formulate on paper the conflicting motives for the two modes of life that were held out to him at this time. Professor Patterson seems to agree with this interpretation of the poems. He says:

Milton seems to be weighing and deciding one of the problems of his life - what

² Saurat, 9-10.
kind of poet he shall become? In "Elegy VI" and in "Ad Patrem" he had written of certain phases of poetry and the life of the poet; he now asks if he is to be a poet, whether he shall devote his life to light, gay, careless, but innocent poetry, or to that which has all the high seriousness of the finest art. For he already believes that the true poet must be the true poem. His decision is to emphasize the high seriousness of "Il Penseroso".

It seems probable that Milton was considering in these two poems a problem that was weighing heavily on his mind at the time. His high seriousness would preclude our viewing the poems in any other light.

In the first of these two poems, "L'Allegro", the poet considers all the motives which might persuade him to pursue the delightful paths trod by the men of the Renaissance before him. He bids sober Melancholy to be away, and he welcomes the gay presence of Mirth. The spirit of the poem is one of exuberant gaiety and imaginative freedom, the spirit of fun-loving pleasure and enjoyment of the satisfactions of this world. The poet then hails Jest, Jollity, Sport, Liberty, Quips, Cranks, wanton Wiles, Nods, Becks, Smiles, and Laughter "holding both his sides" to join his company.

The poet then contemplates the "unreproved pleasures free first among the simple country folk and later among the

3 Patterson, Student's Milton, 49.
sophisticated city dwellers. His joy begins at dawn with the flight of the lark, the lively din of the cock, the gradual scattering of darkness and the rising of the sun. He sees the plowman plowing his field and hears him whistling; he hears the blithe singing of the milkmaid; he watches the shepherd counting his sheep in the dale. He sees the broad, green meadows "with daisies pide," he hears the brook and rivers, he sees the aged towers and battlements. He goes to a cottage window and watches the peasant folk consume their savory dinner. It is a holy day and he watches the young and old gather together to sing and play, to dance and make love, to feast on the good food and spicy nut-brown ale, to listen to the tales of the story-teller at the campfire. When the gentle country folk have retired to their warm beds, the poet goes to the city to seek enjoyment. Here among the gentry and nobility he attends a marriage banquet or a Jonsonian comedy or one of Shakespeare's lighter plays. He finds delight in music, soft Lydian airs.

In this poem Milton examines everything in which his senses may find pleasure. He seeks liberty. He reveals a singular enthusiasm for beauty in nature. His figures, metaphors, and pictures are taken from beautiful nature, from fervent love scenes, from the spirited pageantry of city life. Even the metre rushes along as if borne away by very joy with swiftness and smoothness. In this poem we find Milton's finest expression of his joyous and sensitive poetic nature. He has gone the
limit in this last of the Renaissance poems. He has put the
gay and carefree life on the witness stand, and it has made an
excellent account of itself. There remains but to hear what the
staid Puritan life will have to say in its defense.

Putting aside all the vain pleasures and deluding joys
of "L'Allegro", Milton assumes the character of "Il Penseroso",
the sober deliberative, purposeful man, the solitary, reflective
character. Away with all the sensuous joys of Mirth because
they avail but little for the fixed mind, the mind of the Puritan
trained and disciplined to serve God and Him alone. "Il Pensero-
oso" welcomes Melancholy (to be interpreted as pensive contem-
plation), his companion in this life of trial. There is nothing
to please the senses in the goddess Melancholy. She is too holy
to be gazed upon with human eyes. She is the "pensive Nun, de-
vout and pure, sober, stedfast and demure." All these are quali-
ties that the Puritan admires and practises.

The ancestors of Melancholy are chosen according to the
Puritan tradition. Her mother is Vesta, the patron and guardian
of virgin modesty and purity. Saturn, the male progenitor, is
referred to simply as the solitary, a distinctive Puritan char-
acteristic. The companions of Melancholy are hailed to join the
company: Calm, Peace, Quiet, Spare Fast, Mute Silence, and
finally the cherub Contemplation. These must be the companions
of the rigid Puritan ascetic if he is to attune his ear to the
celestial music and find intimate communion with his God. He is pleased to hear the sweet song of the nightingale, that wise old bird that shuns the noise of folly. It is night, the time that "Il Penseroso" loves, and he seeks some quiet retreat, away from all the delights of Mirth. He seeks some lonely tower where he may sit all through the night and play host to the cherub Contemplation. He studies the powers of the soul, its immortality, its future glory in heaven; he studies the evil powers and the ways of the devil. He would like to witness one of the tragedies, not for any reasons of pleasure, but that he might learn from the buskined players some moral wisdom, for the Greek tragedians were first of all teachers of moral wisdom and guides to truth, the consuming interest of the Puritan. Chaucer tells his tales once again because they have moral significance.

There is no hint here of the enjoyment of reading for its own sake. The reader is seeking more than that. It is hidden meanings, moral truths, religious convictions that he wants.

Throughout the entire poem "Il Penseroso" has been solitary, alone with his thoughts and his God. Now he emerges from his solitude to join his brethren in worship. There with the pealing organ and the full-voiced choir he is swept up with the love of God so that he is lost in ecstasy and all heaven is brought before his eyes.
In this poem John Milton examines the Puritan life in all its phases and he promises to live such a life if Melancholy can provide him with the pleasures of the quiet, sober, purposeful life. The poet chooses the figures and tropes which reflect the quiet, stolid life of the Puritan. Even the metre adds something to this. "Throughout the 'Penseroso' the verse frequently pauses in the midst of the line. It rests like a pensive man, who, walking, stops to think, and its movement is slow, even stately." 4

Milton has represented to his mind both sides of this conflict. He has now but to choose which influence will dominate his future. We shall find in the next chapter that the Puritan "Il Penseroso" had the greatest attraction for the mind of Milton.
CHAPTER V

THE FINAL POEMS OF THE EARLY PERIOD REVEALING

THE SPIRIT OF PURITANISM

During the period from 1634 to 1637 John Milton turned
definitely from the gay, exuberant spirit of the Renaissance
to the sober, reflective spirit of Puritanism. The two poems
written during this period, "Comus" and "Lycidas", bear witness
to this. Yet the poet cannot put aside in a fortnight habits
of mind and expression which he has cultivated over a period of
years. Hence there are in these poems the classical allusions,
the sensitive feeling for nature, and the traditional classical
style of the Renaissance humanist. But this is merely the outer
dress of an inner spirit that is unmistakably Puritan.

The first of these two poems is "Comus". It was probably
written in the Spring of 1634 at the request of Milton's intim-
ate friend Henry Lawes, the musician. The occasion for the
writing of this masque was a celebration at Ludlow Castle in
honor of the Earl of Bridgewater. The first performance of
"Comus" took place on Michaelmas Night, 1634.

The inspiration for this masque came to Milton from many
sources. The form of the masque was in the Jonson and Fletcher
tradition. The Circe myth came from Homer and Spenser. But the Puritan Milton, the young trumpeter of the Lord blowing upon silver reeds, did more than recount the fable as it had been told before. "For his allegory he makes his own the quintessence of that poetic idealism which Puritanism made militant in him."1 The poet goes so far as to change the conventional form of the masque in order that it may conform to his principles as a Puritan. The traditional masque depended for its effect chiefly on the courtly dance, music and pageantry. "Milton minimizes the element of pageantry and dance."2 The masque was essentially a private entertainment with the banquet hall as the setting. But Milton substitutes an outdoor scene for the ordinary setting of the banquet hall. . . . he expands the dialogue portion of the piece far beyond its usual limits and injects into it an earnestness of meaning quite foreign to the tradition.3 Milton also succeeds in expressing a serious ethical philosophy, the philosophy of the Puritan. Haller says of this:

.. . for the startling intensity with which Milton utilizes his material, there is another source. Puritanism may have narrowed, but it also sharpened and

2 Hanford, 158.
3 Ibid., 159
heightened the poetic force in him; 
and his expression of the Puritan 
spirit owed much . . . to the Puritan 
preachers.4

The story of the poem is an old one. The Attendant 
Spirit introduces the fable of "Comus," by telling us that there 
dwells in the dark forest this Comus, son of Bacchus and Circe, 
who urges passing travelers to indulge in a drink which will 
turn them into horrible beasts. He lures a virtuous lady into 
his den and tempts her to sin. She is saved by the strength of 
her virtue and by her two brothers who rush to her aid just in 
time to save her. Virtue is triumphant.

The poem is Milton's attempt to appropriate to himself 
all the best that was in the Puritan preachers' sermons and to 
adapt that to the music and beauty of poetry. This poem was 
written at the very time when Laud, having done his best to 
suppress the Puritan preachers, was turning his wrath upon the 
Puritan pamphleteers. No doubt Milton felt a deep personal 
resentment at this tyranny and consequently he used this poem 
as a means of spreading the Puritan doctrine under a legitimate 
form.

The subject of this Puritan sermon is temptation, or 
rather the sense of freedom from moral danger which is enjoyed

4 Haller, 318.
by the good who know their own minds and are sure of election. It is the unassailable security of the virtuous mind amid every circumstance of violence and wrong. Stopford A. Brooke attests to this interpretation of the poem.

It "Comus" displaced itself as a masque to rise to a poem to the glory and victory of virtue. And its virtue lies in the mastery of the righteous will over sense and appetite. 5

"Love virtue, she alone is free" is the warning and advice that the young Milton gives to his readers. But the virtue he would have us love is Puritan virtue. Haller says:

The virtue that Milton loved was perhaps that of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, are pure in heart, and rejoice to be reviled and persecuted, but hardly that of the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourful, and the merciful. 6

Convinced of his theological correctness, the Puritan poet says again and again that virtue is strong enough to ward off any and all evils. It is a Puritan virtue that Milton is preaching.

In "Comus" Milton expresses some of his most passionately held convictions. He teaches a doctrine that he had held vigourously through his whole life - purity of soul. There is

5 Brooke, 24.
6 Haller, 321.
nothing for which Milton cared more than this. We know from his writings and from statements of contemporaries that he had been faithful to this youthful ideal even under the severe trials of the life at Cambridge. In this poem Milton places in the mouth of the Elder Brother a beautiful song to Chastity:

'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:
She that has that, is clad incompleat steel
And like a quiver'd Nymph with Arrows keen
May trace huge forests, and unharbour'd Heaths,
Infamous hills, and sandy perilous wildes,
Where through the sacred rayes of Chastity,
No savage fierce, Bandite or mountanger
Will dare to soyl her Virgin Purity. 7

This is the virtue of the Puritan. The fair and gentle lady is merely a personification of that virtue. When the hour of trial comes, she shows herself strong in powers of judgment and of reasoning, strong in her spiritual nature, in her tenacity to moral truth, in her indignation towards sin. Although alone and encompassed by evil and danger, she is fearless, and so clear-sighted that the juggling practices of her antagonist are wholly ineffectual against her. Milton admired this Puritan lady who had been his ideal from earliest childhood.

The figures used in this poem are very similar to the figures used in the Puritan sermons. Haller shows this:

7 Student's Milton, "Comus", ll. 419-427, 54-55.
His expression of the Puritan spirit owed . . . much to the Puritan preachers. They too cast the lessons of their inner experience into the image of the pilgrim, seemingly lost, but not abandoned by God, encountering temptation and danger but journeying steadfastly toward heaven, led by the light within. . . . "Comus" with all its lovely reminiscence of the high poetry of the Renaissance, is the poet's version of that sermon of spiritual wayfaring which it would have been his part to preach if he had ever in fact entered the pulpit. 8

The Puritan preachers used many other means of attracting the attention of their listeners. One of these methods was the use of fable and exemplum in which the virtues were personified. Milton too uses this method. In his fable the lady is a personification of chastity. The Attendant Spirit is the protection sent down from heaven upon all those who live a chaste life. Comus is the personification of seductive vice. The monster crew is an example of men who have surrendered themselves to sin and vice. The Elder Brother represents the man who has studied philosophy and truth and who has made himself secure in the knowledge of wisdom. The Younger Brother is a novice whose faith is not yet rationalized. Such personifications were often used by the Puritan preachers.

The Puritan's substitute for the confessional was his

8 Haller, 318.
private journal or diary. As Haller says, Milton did not differ from his religious brethren in this matter.

Perhaps, however, the greatest practitioner that might be claimed for the art was Milton, who at his own remove and with his winning idiosyncrasy, also set forth his own spiritual experience, figuratively in "Comus" and "Lycidas" and explicitly in more than one autobiographical passage of his controversial tracts. 9

At the writing of this poem, Milton had definitely turned from the spirit of the Renaissance, but he had not yet begun to help that section of the Puritan party whose unreasoning hatred of all amusement had flashed out in Prynne's Histriomastix. The poem is in fact a protest made by the more cultured Puritans against those gloomy bigots in the party who frowned upon plays and masques. Milton at this time belonged to the more cultured group of Puritans, but he was none the less a Puritan.

The second poem in this period is "Lycidas". It had been three years since the writing of "Comus." It had been three years of study and meditation on the subject of immortality.

The poem is an elegy written in memory of Edward King who had been a fellow student with Milton at Christ's College. King had been drowned in the English Channel in August, 1637.

9 Haller, 114-115.
His fellow students at Cambridge proposed a memorial volume to be published. There were to be poems in Greek, Latin, and English. "Lycidas" was the last of the English poems.

"Lycidas" is a pastoral in the traditional form of that type of poetry. The setting of the poem is a hillside on which is gathered a group of "woeful shepherds" who have congregated to commemorate the death of one of their own. Then follows the traditional invocation to the muses. Milton tells of his own associations with the dead man, of their studies together at the University, of their walking and working together, of their verse-writing, and finally of their common pursuit of fame. He then calls for the other speakers. Neptune's representative, Triton, although he laments the death of the young scholar, clears the sea of all blame. Hippotades, god of the wind, and Camus, god of the River Cam, both show deep grief. Then St. Peter, who represents the profession for which the young man was preparing himself, tells of the loss to the Church at this time when high-minded men are needed in the ranks of the clergy. The famous floral passage follows. We are then reminded that the dead man shall rise again even as the day-star. The soul is immortal. The final stanza describes the departure of the singer.

The over-all impression given gradually in this poem is one that bespeaks the Puritan spirit, but there are three
passages especially which give conclusive evidence of this. They are the passage on fame, the attack on the prelates, and the passage on immortality.

During his early years at Cambridge, Milton had looked forward eagerly to the day when he would be famous in the eyes of the world. Now he begins to question this fame and reputation. King had shown great promise as a poet, but he had been cut off in his youth by the hand of fate. Milton asks himself:

Alas! what boots it with unceasing care  
To tend the homely, slighted shepherd's trade,  
And strictly meditate the thankless muse?  
Were it not better done, as others use,  
To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,  
Or with the tangles of Naera's hair.  

After spending nights and days in ceaseless labors in order to gain some small share in fame, the youth lost his chance for fame entirely. What boots it to meditate the thankless muse?

"The right Puritan answer follows. He must be a poet because that best pleases God, not for the sake of fame on earth . . . that last infirmity of noble minds, but fame in heaven."  

Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil  
Nor in the glistening foil  
Set off to the world, nor in the broad rumor lies,  
But lives by those pure eyes  
And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;  
As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed.12

This is the Puritan's conviction regarding fame. His interests are primarily centered on the next world and in the light of that life to come he makes all his decisions. God enters into all his thoughts and activities. This is Milton's first great confession of faith. As Haller says, the poem is

Milton's personal confession of his effectual calling from God to be a poet, as truly such as the testimony of any of the spiritual preachers, the confession of his calling and of his answering to the call by the dedication of his talents to the service prompted by faith.13

The attack on the prelates reveals one of Milton's most deeply felt convictions at the time. If the spiritual brethren had been allowed to preach as they saw fit until 1625, Milton would have joined their number and would have left the world for the Church. But while he was at Cambridge he witnessed the gradual suppression of that type of preaching he had been trained to approve. He had felt deep personal resentment against Laud and the prelates who had effected such a state that now "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed." From his earliest years he had been destined for the Church, but by the time he reached maturity he had learned that if he should take orders in the

12 Student's Milton, "Lycidas", 11. 78-84, 42.
13 Haller, 322.
Church he would become a slave. It was for this reason that he had chosen to profess his faith in the Presbyterian form of church government. St. Peter's condemnation is the Puritan's condemnation of those who

for their bellies sake
Creep and intrude and climb into the fold!
Of other care they little reckoning make
Than how to scramble at the shearsers' feast
And shove away the worthy bidden guest.14

This is conclusive proof that Milton's sentiments and convictions are those of the staunch Puritan. More violent condemnations of the prelates will follow. He is content now with the cryptic warning:

But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.15

It is the warning of the stalwart servant of God who will countenance no compromise once he has been convinced of the truth. It is a warning "struck out of the heart of his resentment at the condition of the Church, and it voiced his decision not to be defeated in his ambition to use his talent in the service of God."15

The beautiful passage on the immortality of the soul, of the resurrection of Lycidas, is a sequel and a complement to the passage on fame. Lycidas had been buried in the watery deep, but

15 Ibid., 130-130, 43.
16 Haller, 322.
he would rise again as the day-star from his ocean bed with new glory, and he should hear

the unexpressive nuptial song
In the blest kingdoms meek of love and joy.
There entertain him all the saints above,
In solemn troops, and sweet societies,
That sing, and singing in their glory move,
And wipe the tears forever from his eyes.17

This is the nuptial day for Lycidas, and it is the day towards which every Puritan looks expectantly. It is the reason why he denies himself the pleasures of this life. Convinced of his own immortality he travels as a pilgrim here below in order that his soul may be joined with its bridegroom "in the blest kingdoms meek of love and joy." This passage on immortality is another reason for Haller's just remark: "Nothing written at the time except Milton's 'Lycidas' gives more intense expression of a personality . . . totally devoted to essentially Puritan ideals."18

"Comus" and "Lycidas" reveal many more characteristics than have been enumerated. They show, for instance, Milton's sincere conviction of his theological correctness, his refusal to compromise with worldliness, his passionate love of civic freedom, his personal zeal in contemplating his own soul. But one characteristic of the Puritan he refused to share. The

17 Student's Milton, "Lycidas", 176-181, 44.
18 Haller, 259.
Puritan was guided by his feelings and emotions. For Milton the intellect was supreme. For him the head was more important than the heart.

Nonetheless "Comus" and "Lycidas" are poems of the Puritan spirit. Haller makes this plain.

"Comus" and "Lycidas" are as authentic expressions of the Puritan spirit as anything that came from the hand of Prynne. No one has written English of surer beauty or made more surpassing music out of words. No one has made us thrill more deeply to the loveliness of the English countryside, to the mystery of the sea, to the majesty of rich names... Yet no one has made beauty come to the heel of a more resolute morality. Protestantism, humanistic faith in literary art -- the two became completely one in this poet who was no less a Puritan for being a poet.19

In Milton the cause of the Puritan preachers had enlisted a great literary genius, one who brought the idealism bred by the poetry and philosophy of the Renaissance humanism to the support of Puritan revolutionary zeal in Church and State.

19 Haller, 317
CONCLUSION

It is of the essence of all things human and material that they be changeable. Rational human beings are capable of a distinctive mutation which they share with neither the creatures below them in the scale of perfection nor with those above him. Neither the brute nor the angel may assimilate itself more truly to the likeness of its Creator by gaining new and greater perfections. This is man's prerogative.

It has been shown in this paper that the mind of John Milton experienced a great change during his early years at the University and at Horton. It was a change of view from the worldliness of the Renaissance to the spiritual outlook of the Puritan. It was during these years of study and prayer that he prepared his soul for the great task that was before him: to explain the ways of God to man.

Although Milton did not obtain perfect assimilation to his Creator, his sincerity and love of God made him an exceptional man and a great poet.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Bernard J. Dooley, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English, West Baden College, West Baden Springs, Indiana.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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