JOHN MILTON

AREOPAGITICA

A speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parlament of England

– ANNOTATED –

SSEL

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LIFE OF MILTON

BY A. W. VERITY

MILTON'S life falls into these clearly defined divisions. The first period ends with the poet's return from Italy in 1639; the second at the Restoration in 1660, when release from the fetters of politics enabled him to remind the world that he was a great poet; the third is brought to a close with his death in 1674. We propose to summarise the main events of the three periods.

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608, in London. He came, in his own words, *ex genere honesto.* A family of Miltons had been settled in Oxfordshire since the reign of Elizabeth. The poet's father had been educated at an Oxford school, possibly as a chorister in one of the College choir-schools, and imbibing Anglican sympathies had conformed to the Established Church. For this he was disinherited by his Roman Catholic father. He settled in London, following the profession of scrivener. A scrivener combined the occupations of lawyer and law-stationer. It appears to have been a lucrative calling; certainly John Milton (the poet was named after the father) attained to

easy circumstances He married about 1600, and had six children, of whom several died young. The third child was the poet.

The elder Milton was evidently a man of considerable culture, in particular an accomplished musician, and a composer whose madrigals were deemed worthy of being printed side by side with those of Byrd, Orlando Gibbons and other leading musicians of the time. To him, no doubt, the poet owed the love of music of which we see frequent indications in the poems[1]. Realising, too, that in his son lay the promise and possibility of future greatness, John Milton took the utmost pains to have the boy adequately educated; and the lines *Ad Patrem* show that the ties of affection between father and child were of more than ordinary closeness.

Milton was sent to St Paul's School about the year 1620. Here two influences, apart from those of ordinary school-life, may have affected him particularly. The headmaster was a good English scholar; he published a grammar containing many extracts from English poets, notably Spenser; it is reasonable to assume that he had not a little to do with the encouragement and guidance of Milton's early taste for English poetry [2]. Also, the founder of St Paul's School, Colet, had prescribed as part of the school-course the study of certain early Christian writers, whose influence is said to be directly traceable in Milton's poems and may in some cases have suggested his choice of sacred themes. While at St Paul's, Milton also had a tutor at home, Thomas Young, a Scotchman, afterwards an eminent

Puritan divine—the inspirer, doubtless, of much of his pupil's Puritan sympathies. And Milton enjoyed the signal advantage of growing up in the stimulating atmosphere of cultured home-life. Most men do not realise that the word "culture" signifies anything very definite or desirable before they pass to the University; for Milton, however, home-life meant, from the first, not only broad interests and refinement, but active encouragement towards literature and study. In 1625 he left St Paul's. Of his extant English poems[3] only one, *On the Death of a Fair Infant,* dates from his school-days; but we are told that he had written much verse, English and Latin. And his early training had done that which was all-important: it had laid the foundation of the far-ranging knowledge which makes *Paradise Lost* unique for diversity of suggestion and interest.

Milton went to Christ's College, Cambridge, in the Easter term of 1625, took his B.A. degree in 1629, proceeded M.A. in 1632, and in the latter year left Cambridge. The popular view of Milton's connection with the University will be coloured for all time by Johnson's unfortunate story that for some unknown offence he "suffered the public indignity of corporal correction." For various reasons this story is now discredited by the best judges. It is certain, however, that early in 1626 Milton did have some serious difficulty with his tutor, which led to his removal from Cambridge for a few weeks and his transference to another tutor on his return later in the term. He spoke of the incident bitterly at the time in one of his Latin poems, and he spoke of Cambridge bitterly in after years On the other hand he

voluntarily passed seven years at the University, and resented strongly the imputations brought against him in the "Smectymnuus" controversy that he had been in ill-favour with the authorities of his college. Writing in 1642, he takes the opportunity "to acknowledge publicly with all grateful mind, that more than ordinary favour and respect, which I found above any of my equals at the hands of those courteous and learned men, the fellows of that college wherein I spent some years: who at my parting, after I had taken two degrees, as the manner is, signified many ways how much better it would content them that I would stay; as by many letters full of kindness and loving respect, both before that time, and long after, I was assured of their singular good affection towards me[4]." And if we look into those uncomplimentary allusions to Cambridge which date from the controversial period of his life we see that the feeling they represent is hardly more than a phase of his theological bias. He detested ecclesiasticism, and for him the two Universities (there is a fine impartiality in his diatribes) are the strongholds of what he detested: "nurseries of superstition"—"not yet well recovered from the scholastic grossness of barbarous ages"—given up to "monkish and miserable sophistry," and unprogressive in their educational methods. But it may fairly be assumed that Milton the scholar and poet, who chose to spend seven years at Cambridge, owed to her more than Milton the fierce controversialist admitted or knew. A poet he had proved himself before leaving the University in 1632 The short but exquisite ode *At a Solemn Music,* and the *Nativity Hymn* (1629), were already written

Milton’s father had settled at Horton in Buckinghamshire. Thither the son retired in July, 1632. He had gone to Cambridge with the intention of qualifying for some profession, perhaps the Church [5]. This purpose was soon given up, and when Milton returned to his father’s house he seems to have made up his mind that there was no profession which he cared to enter He would choose the better part of studying and preparing himself, by rigorous self-discipline and application, for the far-off divine event to which his whole life moved.

It was Milton’s constant resolve to achieve something that should vindicate the ways of God to men, something great that should justify his own possession of unique powers — powers of which, with no trace of egotism, he proclaims himself proudly conscious. The feeling finds repeated expression in his prose; it is the guiding-star that shines clear and steadfast even through the mists of politics. He has a mission to fulfil, a purpose to accomplish, no less than the most fanatic of religious enthusiasts; and the means whereby this end is to be attained are devotion to religion, devotion to learning, and ascetic purity of life

This period of self-centred isolation lasted from 1632 to 1638 Gibbon tells us among the many wise things contained in that most wise book the *Autobiography,* that every man has two educations: that which he receives from his teachers and that which he owes to himself, the latter being infinitely the more important. During these five years Milton completed his second education, ranging the whole world of classical [6]antiquity and absorbing the classical

genius so thoroughly that the ancients were to him what they afterwards became to Landor, what they have never become to any other English poet in the same degree, even as the very breath of his being, pursuing, too, other interests, such as music, astronomy [7]—and the study of Italian literature; and combining these vast and diverse influences into a splendid equipment of hard-won, well-ordered culture. The world has known many greater scholars in the technical, limited sense than Milton, but few men, if any, who have mastered more things worth mastering in art, letters and scholarship [8]. It says much for the poet that he was sustained through this period of study, pursued *ohne Hast, ohne Rast,* by the full consciousness that all would be crowned by a masterpiece which should add one more testimony to the belief in that God who ordains the fates of men. It says also a very great deal for the father who suffered his son to follow in this manner the path of learning.

True, Milton gave more than one earnest of his future fame. The dates of the early pieces— *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Arcades, Comus* and *Lycidas* —are not all certain; but probably each was composed at Horton before 1638. Four of them have great autobiographic value as an indirect commentary, written from Milton's coign of seclusion, upon the moral crisis through which English life and thought were passing, the clash between the careless hedonism of the Cavalier world and the deepening austerity of Puritanism. In *L'Allegro* the poet holds the balance almost equal between the two opposing tendencies. In *Il Penseroso* it becomes clear to which side his sympathies

are leaning. *Comus* is a covert prophecy of the downfall of the Court-party, while *Lycidas* openly “foretells the ruine” of the Established Church. The latter poem is the final utterance of Milton’s lyric genius. Here he reaches, in Mr Mark Pattison’s words, the highwater mark of English verse; and then—the pity of it—he resigns that place among the *lyrici vates* of which the Roman singer was ambitious, and for nearly twenty years suffers his lyre to hang mute and rusty in the temple of the Muses.

The composition of *Lycidas* may be assigned to the year 1637. In the spring of the next year Milton started for Italy. It was natural that he should seek inspiration in the land where many English poets, from Chaucer to Shelley, have found it. Milton remained abroad some fifteen months. Originally he had intended to include Sicily and Greece in his travels, but news of the troubles in England hastened his return. He was brought face to face with the question whether or not he should bear his part in the coming struggle; whether without self-reproach he could lead any longer this life of learning and indifference to the public weal. He decided as we might have expected that he would decide, though some good critics see cause to regret the decision. Milton puts his position very clearly in his *Defensio Secunda:* “I thought it base to be travelling for amusement abroad, while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home.” And later: “I determined to relinquish the other pursuits in which I was engaged, and to transfer the whole force of my talents and my industry to this one important object” (i.e. the vindication of liberty).