

"The genius and virtue of John Milton

(1608—1674)

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Fourth Year B. A. Class

"The child is father of the man" can be best illustrated in the case of Milton, the great poet, who was almost throughout his life a voracious and omnivorous reader. He was "studious and thoughtful beyond his years." One of the poet's earliest biographers tells us that "when he was very young, he studied very hard and sat up very late, commonly till twelve or one o'clock at night." His father, who was a man of wide sympathies, a musician of no mean order and capable in every way of appreciating the genius of his older son who was to become the world-famous author of *Paradise Lost*, ordered the maid to sit up for him. It was in these years that Milton laid the foundations of his versatile genius.

As a scholar, as a poet, as a patriot and as a saint Milton was great and stood high above nearly all his contemporaries.

Milton was a great scholar who was no pedant. He remained at the University of Cambridge for seven years and took his degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1629 and his Master's degree in 1632. Milton's true genius first began fully to unfold itself after he had passed the B. A. examination. In 1630, he wrote 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity' of which Hallam says that it is "perhaps the finest in the English language," and Hando says that "it is incomparably the noblest piece of lyric poetry in any modern language that I am conversant with."

He was not satisfied with his University education. He had a ravenous longing for the acquisition of a vast knowledge and he therefore made continental tours—in France, Italy and Switzerland. His original plan was to visit Sicily and Greece, but he was compelled to be back in England owing to the call of his country. "I considered it disgraceful," as he afterwards wrote, "that while my fellow-countrymen were fighting at home for liberty, I should be travelling abroad at ease for intellectual pursuits."

Mr. Webb dwells on the the results of his tour thus:—"The chief results of his tour, besides the broadening of his mental horizon, were two: he had come into living contact with the results of the Papal system in the person of the imprisoned Galileo; and by close study of the strict Petrarchan Model he re-created the English sonnet. The Shakespeare sonnet has been the perfect reflex of Shakespeare's own personality," but "In his (Milton's) hand

The thing (sonnet) became a trumpet, whence he blew
Soul-animating strains."

Milton had mastered Latin and Greek, had learned some Hebrew and by the advice of his father studied French and Italian. In short, his knowledge was multifarious, extensive and almost encyclopædic.

As a child Milton was fond of poetry. When he was fifteen years old, he paraphrased Psalms cxiv and cxxxvi. The latter of these two shows distinct signs of Milton's peculiar genius. He reached the topmost pinnacle of glory as a great poet when he composed Paradise Lost which was, "one of the greatest, most noble, and most sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced."

The story on which Paradise Lost is based is composed of the simplest elements:—(1) a garden of fruit trees, (2) a man and a woman, (3) a solemn warning not to taste the fruit of one of the trees, (4) temptation to taste coming from the mouth of a serpent, (5) neglect of the warning and (6) expulsion from the garden in consequence.

Such a story is far beyond the comprehension of any poet who had hitherto chosen it for his theme. Walter Raleigh says, "The theme it handles is vaster and of a more universal human interest than handled by Milton's predecessors."

"The only poem" says Macaulay, "of modern times which can be compared with Paradise Lost is the Divine Comedy" of Dante. Mathew Arnold says, "In the sure and flawless perfection of his rhythm and diction he is as admirable as Virgil or Dante, and in this respect he is unique amongst us. No one else in English literature and art possesses the like distinction." He continues "Milton, from one end of Paradise Lost to the other, is in his diction and rhythm constantly a great artist in the great style. Stopford A. Brooke says "The style is always great. On the whole it is the greatest in the whole range of English Poetry."

Paradise Regained also attests to his poetical talent. Even Johnson thinks that "if it had been written, not by Milton, but by some imitator, it would receive universal praise." Wordsworth thought it, "the most perfect in the execution of any thing written by Milton." And Coleridge says of it, "in its kind it is the most perfect poem extant." Besides these two poems, *Camus*, *Lyciadas*, *L'Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso* remain to this day as "the finest flower of English poesy."

Milton's bold use of blank verse in epic poem is a measure of his poetic genius. "As no one, before Milton, had maintained in argument that blank verse was the best English measure for narrative poetry dealing with lofty themes, so no critic had ever been at the pains to refute that opinion." "At the time when blank verse was yielding to decay, Milton took it up, and used it neither for conversational nor for rhetorical purposes. In the interests of pure poetry and melody he lightened its joints, stiffened its texture, and one by one gave up almost all the licenses that the dramatists had used." "He mended the sambling gait of the loose dramatic blank verse and made of it a worthy epic metre." The chief characteristic of Milton's poetry is its majestic diction and its perfection of musical form and imagination. "Reading Milton," it has been said, "is like dining off gold plate in a company of Kings." Coleridge says truly that Milton is "not a picturesque, but a musical poet." Tennyson has aptly described him as the "God-gifted organ-voice of England."

Milton was a great poet and he wrote in a style which by its dignity and susceptibility reminded one of the roar of the rolling waves of the sea. His writings were free from any selfish motives and resembled in their chastity the cloudless sky. Wordsworth very beautifully and justly sings the praise of Milton thus:—

"Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea,
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free."

Milton was not less famous as a prose writer than as a poet. Pattison says, "Jeremy Taylor's prose is poetical prose. Milton's prose is not poetical prose, but a different thing, the prose of a poet; not like Taylor's loaded with imagery on the outside; but coloured by imagination, from within." *Areopagitica* bears testimony to the splendid proof of his genius as a prose writer. Stopford A Brooke says, "He is nearly at his best as a prose writer in the *Areopagitica*."

Milton was a great patriot who suffered the loss of all things for the great cause he devoted his life to. The man who was capable of writing such a poem as Paradise Lost was, to say the least, bound to be as much a lover of liberty and friend of his country, as he was a poet. He was to Macaulay, "the most devoted and eloquent literary champion" of the principle of liberty.

Poetry was to be abandoned for politics. Such was the condition of the times, that other services than those of a poet were required of him. He obeyed this call and for more than twenty years he gave himself up to the urgent political and social questions of the day. He wrote on the Freedom of the Press, On Church Government, on Divorce, On Education, in defence of the English people when assailed by Saumase for the execution of their King Charles I. During all this period he wrote no poetry except a few sonnets. Shortly after the execution of Charles I Milton was appointed to the post of Latin Secretary under Cromwell's Government. He continued his official life despite the total blindness that came upon him in 1652 upto the very eve of the Restoration in 1660.

Milton with the insight of genius was able to perceive that he was destined to be a great poet. He was making the utmost sacrifice possible to him when he put aside his great, his God-given gift of poetic genius for the sake of what he believed to be true and right.

Milton's sufferings knew no bounds at the Restoration which spelt for him the utter ruin of the cause for which he had fought so long and so resolutely. From the position of dignity and easy independence he was at once reduced to poverty and obscurity. His official salary and the greater part of his private property were altogether lost. What he had was only the exaltation of victory; he was now on the beaten side. It proves Milton's real magnanimity of soul that instead of being overwhelmed by this accumulation of misfortunes to which must be added his blindness, helplessness and loneliness;

"Though fallen on evil days,
On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues,
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
And solitude —"

He now appeared a more erect and nobler figure than ever before. It was of Milton, Wordsworth wrote :—

“Soul awful—if the earth has ever lodged
An awful soul !”

Milton led a dedicated life the chastity of which was free from blot and stain. He was a great saint whose habitual mood was communion with the invisible world. He was religious minded and had implicit credence in the divine power. The deep religious patience helped him to think that the best way of serving God was to resign himself completely to His will, and he wrote :—

“They also serve who only stand and wait.” From no other English poet do we gather the impression that he lived “as ever in the great Taskmaster’s eye.”

Milton, “the poet, the statesman, the philosopher, the glory of English literature, the champion and the martyr of English liberty” will be worshipped in all love and reverence by the English men of all ages.

Milton died on November 8, 1674.

Memory

PROFESSOR PULIN BEHARI KUR

In mist, in darkness, and despair,
Your memory serves a beacon bright,
To guide my care-tossed soul’s career,
—A helmless boat in the ocean’s might.
When dark the sea-waves’ mighty roll,
Ever and ever troubled breast,
Drives me diveous to the treacherous shoal,
Studded like the monarch’s showy crest,
Your calm and holy face serene,
A countenance angelic, in earth unseen,
In memory’s pages ever green,
Guides me, by kindling light within.