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Milton.

By the BISHOP OF DURHAM.

THE three-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Milton has awakened, as it well might do, much reverent attention. For a time—it can only be for a time in the long history of thought and letters—his eminent greatness has experienced something like a partial eclipse. Certainly it is not now with his fame as it was in the days when it was common to class him, as Gray does in his fine lines addressed to Thomas Bentley, and in "The Progress of Poesy," with Shakespeare, as the equal splendour in a supreme binary star of English poetry. Not now, as once, is Milton sure to be the familiar and revered companion of the accomplished gentleman, as he was to Burke, to Grenville, and to Macaulay; not now as long ago is a quotation from Milton, as from Shakespeare, sure to strike and please a popular audience. Many influences have contributed to the change, under which Milton has come, for the current generation, to be a somewhat remote interest—rather read about than read, rather a subject for literary courses than a private delight and wonder of the mind. However, the change is as undoubted as it is regrettable—traceable not a little to impaired literary ideals and to educational hurry.

The more welcome to the faithful Miltonist is the occasion of the Tercentenary, which will assuredly do much to recall into its true place in English minds this most illustrious, this most elevated, name.

I may claim by right of a long fidelity a modest place among Miltonists. In my very young days, among the many other blessings of a native home whose memory grows always dearer and more admirable—I had almost said, more unique—with recollection, it was my privilege to find both opportunity and encouragement to make acquaintance with much of our greatest literature—not in the way of "set subjects" for premature examinations, but in the way of nature and of love. Among my

earliest remembrances are two sets of Milton—one a beautiful pocket copy of about 1808, standing on my mother's bookshelves; the other on my father's, a fine four-volume copy of Bishop Newton's edition, whose large print and interesting notes made reading easy. Both these copies are now in my study, and at least as dear to me as ever. As I look at them and into them what hours and scenes they summon up!—by the winter fire, in the summer garden; times of silent reading, times of delighted listening to chosen passages of beauty or majesty; while there stole more and more into the mind a sense of Milton's greatness, impossible then to analyze or describe, but enough to make him the literary "god of the idolatry" of the young reader. It was only natural that in later days, at Cambridge, the opportunity of a college prize was taken to get possession of an edition of Milton's whole writings, verse and prose. This also is still mine, cherished, like the others, for memory's sake as well as for its own. Two volumes of the eight lie now before me, the two which embrace, with an elaborate Memoir, the entire series of the poems—not only in a type of splendid clearness, but edited from first editions, and so preserving Milton's own interesting system of spelling.

This slight and fragmentary paper can hardly take a better guide than that given by the contents of these two volumes. Little more than an enumeration is needed to convey the impression which is most present to my own thoughts upon Milton as a poet—namely, that of the essential *greatness* of the man and of his mind. It was a greatness vastly varied in the modes of its display in detail, and around it his wonderful industry had gathered a mass of knowledge, literary and artistic, surprising even in that "great century." Yet never for a moment did the weight of mental possessions choke the central fire of the native genius which assimilated and wielded all; and through all the varied modes of the poetical working, from the lightest to the most massive, we have still the unalterable essence of the man, the elevation of thought and of sight which never loses dignity in the exquisite rural pictures of "L'Allegro," and never

deviates into the turgid and the overstrained when the great Epic calls him into Hell, or Heaven, or Eden; when he brings Satan and Gabriel face to face at midnight in the Garden, or recites the dialogue of Adam and Raphael, or the vision of "all the kingdoms" shown by the Tempter to the Lord on the mountain-top.

In my first volume (the edition is Mitford's, 1863) the poems —it matters not now on what principle — are ranged thus: "Samson," "Comus," "Lycidas," "Il Penseroso," "L'Allegro," "Arcades"; followed by the group of Miscellaneous Poems, which include, with others, the "Christmas Ode," "On Time," and "At a Solemn Musick." Then come the twenty-three Sonnets, five of them in Italian; then the translations of Psalms; then the long series of the Latin Poems—Elegies, Epigrams, and "Sylvæ." The contents of the second volume are soon recounted; "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained."

Take first the poems of the first volume. Some of these are, for our purpose at least, comparatively negligible. Among the Miscellanea are a few whose work, with noble themes, is not by any means Milton's best—"The Passion," "The Fair Infant Dying," "The Circumcision." A few, as the lines on the death of Hobson, of "Hobson's choice," serve only to betray, by a heavy attempt at humour, the one great blank in Milton's mental equipment—the complete absence of the humorous faculty. And the lines on Salmasius should never have been written; they only exhibit the deplorable controversial manners of the time. But what have we not in the main contents of the volume! Does an English reader, without Greek, wish to understand the severe yet vivid grandeur of Greek tragedy, at its greatest, as in the best work of Sophocles? I boldly say that "Samson" will adequately put him in possession of his quest. The English poet, steeped in Christian lore and its Old Testament preparation, has so completely "thought himself," as to the literary viewpoint, into the mind of the great Athenian that a family likeness to the author of "Electra" and "Antigone" is visible on every page—not a mask cleverly moulded and put on, but a

character coming out. And what shall be said of "Comus," the drama of Milton's genial and splendid youth, as "Samson" is that of his overshadowed age? For myself I do not know where to look, in the whole range of English poetry for a creation at once and all through so exquisite and so stately, so rich with an overflowing and vernal wealth of loveliest fancy and resplendent imagery, so redolent of the delight of a genius just feeling the full and joyful consciousness of its manifold power to create and to delight, and at the same time so magnificently lofty in its moral ideal, and so powerful in the presentation of it. It is of its own sort quite incomparable. If we possessed it as the one achievement of the writer, could we set him lower than the broad summit of our Parnassus—entitled to walk with Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and the very greatest of the moderns? But then follows "Lycidas," artificial enough as to much of its framework, almost an "exercise" as to conception and form, yet such a poem that Tennyson used to say that it was the best test he knew of the true lover of true poetry: as a man liked or did not like "Lycidas," so was he capable or not of the "vision" of what makes immortal verse. "Lycidas" is followed by "Il Penseroso" and "L'Allegro." The opening passages in each case are less beautiful than they might be, with their too bold mythology. But, then, each poem in its own way runs singing along its sweet course, trochaic or iambic, in successions of scenery and thought exquisite in variety, in harmony, in insight into life and nature, in infinite delicacy and strength of musical phrase. Wonderful were those creative years at pleasant Horton, between the periods of Cambridge and Italy, when Milton, at peace and at the same time alive with the noblest mental ambitions, read vast ranges of the Greek and Latin literatures, and wrote "Comus," "Lycidas," "Il Penseroso," "L'Allegro," having already proved his "faculty divine" in the "Christmas Ode," written at college in his almost boyhood.

Over that first splendid feat of young imagination, matured knowledge, and holy reverence, I must not linger; nor over those

two noble gems of thought and verse, his much later work, the short meditative poems "On Time" and "At a Solemn Musick" —short, but with all the qualities of his greatest masterpieces visible in them. Even the Sonnets can have only a meagre mention here. But how worthy every one of them is of loving study! The mind which never once betrays fatigue or inadequacy when the theme is the fall of the "giant angels" or the song of the eternal chorus upon the jasper pavement before the Throne, manages here the strict limits and delicate structure of the sonnet with a *curiosa felicitas* worthy of Horace. Yet this never interferes with the man's characteristic elevation. The lovely and the lofty are perfectly combined in the sonnets on his Twenty-Third Year, "To a Virtuous Young Lady," on Mrs. Catherine Thompson, on his Blindness, on his Departed Wife; and that on the Martyrs of Piedmont is said by Palgrave ("Golden Treasury," Notes) to be "the most mighty sonnet in any language known to the editor."

It is tempting to write at some length on the Latin poems, but here it is impossible. Their free and brilliant use of the language alone, apart from the frequent interest of their allusions to persons and places connected with Milton's life, makes them a worthy study for the reader who can still spare admiration for the classical scholar's art. Forty years ago I remember my dear college tutor, J. Lemprière Hammond, a finished critic of such work, say that he placed Milton well above Tibullus among the Latin poets. Here and there a liberty is taken—consciously, I think—with the rigid rules of scansion, but these are only spots on a clear sun. As Milton "thinks himself" into Sophocles in "Samson," so he "thinks himself," not, as it seems to me, into any one Latin poet, but into the spirit of Augustan verse as a whole, in his Elegies and "Sylvæ." Curiously enough, he seems to have placed Ovid, *as regards what he might have done*, higher than Virgil ("Elegia I.," 21 to 24)—nay, even than Homer: a very interesting paradox. And even the "Sylvæ," where the form is obviously Virgilian, seem to me to show traces of this devotion to Ovid in many touches of their

style. But I allude to the "Poemata" here mainly to point out, *apropos*, one grand quality of Milton's mind—its capacity to combine and use together, on the one hand, an immense mass of learning; on the other, the precision of a thorough and refined grammatical scholarship. The phenomenon has its counterpart in other regions of his genius and work—in his capacity for intense private study and also for the arena of public affairs; in his delight in the Muse, along with an energetic participation in political and theological controversy; in the wonderful fusion throughout both his greatest poems of reason in its loftiest sense, the handling of "high argument," or rather of a massive chain of high arguments, all along the epic, with a never-failing literary perfection in phrase and rhythm, while the lustre of an inexhaustible imagination is shed upon the whole work.

Almost on purpose I have put off to the last, and to a narrow space, any definite reference to the two Epics. To speak worthily of them would demand some sparks of a kindred genius. It is better to be studiously brief than to attempt impossibility at length. A recent re-perusal of some of the greatest passages of "Paradise Lost"—above all, perhaps, the closing scenes of the Fourth Book, where Ithuriel finds the fallen Archangel and leads him through the dark to Gabriel—has more than confirmed my lifelong belief that for sheer magnificence of conception and diction, immeasurably removed from the suspicion of rhetorical effort and artifice, there is nothing in poetry quite like Milton at his highest. And he has a wonderful habit of being at his highest. I have named one surpassing passage, but it would be easy to fill a long paragraph with references to others in which he walks with supreme ease at the same elevation. And this he does in connection with a wide variety of subjects, ranging from Messiah's overthrow of His foes from the wall of heaven ("Far off his coming shone"!) to Adam's welcome of Raphael to the Garden; and the apostrophe to "Holy Light," uttered out of the poet's blindness; and that scene at the close of

all, at once most tender and most majestic, where Michael ushers the pair out of the Garden into the open plains of earth.

The same deep impression of unsurpassed dignity attaches to the second and severer epic. In "Paradise Regained" we meet again the poet of "Comus," the young eulogist of celestial Virtue. He is in his old age now, after the long school-time of life. The genial efflorescence of thought and imagination has given place to an almost extreme restraint of form and diction. But the fire is always there, and the victory of Virtue is conceived and recorded with a reverence which now is worship; for it is embodied in the person of Him whom I, for one, firmly believe that Milton, however betrayed into lamentable deficiencies in his attempt in prose at a theoretical Christology, adored in soul and will as his God and Saviour.

But my poor tribute to the name of Milton must "here have ending." Gladly would I go on to explore many a theme untouched here. It would be pleasant to say something of Milton as the poet of Nature whose soul, with an insight commonly associated with later times than his, saw deep into the secret beauty of the twilight meadow, the mountain-forest, the flowers of the valley, and the setting sun. I would fain dwell a little on the combination in Milton of the great genius and the great man—no common amalgam in the history of poetry. I would say something, however inadequate, of his magnificent prose, which Macaulay puts far above that of Burke at his best. But this must not be attempted. I close with the one remark that in Milton England possesses not only a great poet, but as to the moral force of his ideals, a great prophet, a great preacher of righteousness. As in theology, so in ethics he had unhappily his theoretical aberrations; but these, if I see them aright, were excrescences of his intellect, not facts rooted in his life and living in his soul as it has found expression in his verse.

One hundred and six years ago, William Wordsworth, whose mind and character, with many marked differences, had some noble affinities with Milton's, wrote thus of him, contemplating

rather the man than the poet, and the words, with their grave and elevated invective and appeal, have a solemn timeliness for our day:

"Milton, thou should'st be living at this hour;
England hath need of thee; she is a fen
Of stagnant waters; altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
O raise us up, return to us again,
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
Pure as the native heavens, majestic, free:
So didst thou travel on life's common way
In cheerful godliness: and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay."

Christ's Predictions of His Return.

By the Rev. CANON GRIERSON, B.D.

AT the present time, when it is very generally felt that the solutions of the various questions that are raised by the Christian faith can best be found by investigating the personality of its Founder, special interest necessarily attaches to the predictive element in the teaching of our Lord; for in this we are brought face to face at once with the mystery of His being. Prophets before Jesus of Nazareth foretold the future, but to none of them was this mysterious power granted in anything like the degree in which it was possessed by Jesus Christ. If we accept our Gospels as giving a substantially correct account of the events they record, there is no doubt that His statements regarding events long future are as clear and circumstantial as our statements usually are regarding matters within present knowledge.

There are critics who regard some of these prophecies as