

John Milton's Blank Verse and the Republican Spirit in Poetry

by Paul B. Gallagher



The Granger Collection

Paradise Lost.
A
POEM
IN
TWELVE BOOKS.

The Author
JOHN MILTON.

The Second Edition
Revised and Augmented by the
same Author.

LONDON,
Printed by S. Simmons next door to the
olden Lion in Alderjate-street, 1674.

Title-page of second edition.

SAMSON
AGONISTES,
A
DRAMATIC POEM.

The Author
JOHN MILTON.

*Arifot. Tract. Cap. 6.
Tragedia di imitatoe all'imito fozia. &c. Per misericordiam &
morum perficietur ratiorem afflictiorem.*

LONDON,

Printed by J. M. for John Starkey at the
Mitre in Fleetstreet, near Temple-Bar.
MDCLXXI.

*John Milton, with
title pages of his epic
"Paradise Lost," and
tragedy "Samson
Agonistes."*

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world; when revolutionary movements shake people from their commonplace opinions, prejudices, and self-love, then the “legislation” of great poetry summons them toward truth and justice. In the period of the American Revolution and its aftermath, the influence of “poet-legislator” John Milton was felt throughout the English-speaking world. His poetry was most widely beloved among Americans, and a towering influence upon England’s great “American” poets, Shelley and John Keats.

Milton died in poverty, blindness, and virtual exile in 1674, after the failure of the English Commonwealth which he had served, and the British oligarchy’s restoration of those degenerate “merry monarchs,” the Stuart kings. But, he lived on through the great influence of his epic, *Paradise Lost*, particularly in colonial and revolutionary America, where it was thought uniquely to combine the beauty of poetry with the virtue of freedom.

First published in 1667, *Paradise Lost* was the most powerful work of English poetry from Mil-

ton’s death (1674) until the American Revolution. It was read in the American colonies from the pulpit like Scripture, used in the schoolroom like a primer, cited by political leaders, and read aloud and recited in homes. President John Adams wrote of “the divine, immortal Milton,” that “[he] will convince any candid mind, that there is no good government but what is republican.”¹ John Quincy Adams quoted in his speeches the man he called simply, “the poet,” and whose poetry he had taught in his Harvard College lectures.

Milton’s “conclave in Pandemonium” in *Paradise Lost*—the conclave of the fallen angels thrust into

*Reflections on the ‘American’ poets
John Keats and Percy Shelley*

Hell and become devils—became for American republicans the defining metaphor of British aristocracy's plots to subjugate them, and defined European *oligarchism* in general, as titled and privileged Satanism.

Even more important was Milton's influence, as "poet-legislator," upon other great Classical poets, in particular upon John Keats and the republican Shelley himself. To them, the "blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton" was an ideal for which to strive—the most difficult form of verse for the poet's art to create; the easiest for the reader to recite beautifully, truthfully, naturally. There is no rhyme to adorn the verses or to assist in remembering them. But, without the distraction of rhyme as a mental stop-sign at the end of each verse, the poet's *thought* is free to flow suspended over many verses, changing and developing, yet holding the sustained attention of his audience. Like Shakespeare and Milton, Shelley knew that the greatest ideas of freedom and justice, human intelligence and creativity, could be expressed most beautifully in this form and those poetic forms most like it.

Blank verse was considered ugly by the so-called English Enlightenment, the two centuries between the lifetimes of Shakespeare and Shelley; as Shelley wrote, "Milton stood alone in the age that he illumined." Enlightenment poetry degenerated into little else but clever rhyming, devoid of ideas or real passion. Court poets did not scruple to rewrite Shakespeare's plays and Milton's epics all in rhyming couplets, until the originals became almost unknown.

But to Shelley Milton was, with Homer and Dante Alighieri, "the third among the sons of light"—epic poets of the rise of mankind and of mankind's best creation, the republic, as Shelley expressed this in his poem "Adonais":

—He died,
Who was the Sire of an immortal strain,
Blind, old, and lonely, when his country's pride,
The priest, the slave, and the liberticide,
Trampled and mocked with many a loathèd rite
Of lust and blood; he went unterrified,
Into the gulf of death; but his clear Sprite
Yet reigns o'er earth; the third among the sons of light.

An Unacknowledged Legislator

In the Twentieth century, Milton became once again an *unacknowledged* legislator, the effect of the promotion of the attacks on him by the "existentialist" poets, led by the Tory T.S. Eliot and the pro-Mussolini Fascist Ezra Pound. Their anti-Milton campaign, while more success-

ful, was built on the attacks on the poet by Dr. Samuel Johnson and Voltaire in the Eighteenth century, and by the Stuart monarchs' court poet John Dryden in the Seventeenth. All wanted to eradicate the influence of *Paradise Lost*, chief among Milton's great works. To Eliot, launching existentialist poetry in the 1920's, Milton's poetic style was "the great problem of our poetic sensibility these two-and-one-half centuries." More vitriolic, the pro-Fascist Ezra Pound cursed America's republican founders for their love of Milton:

Milton's real place is closer to Drummond or Hawthorn-
den [a forgotten local poet] than to 'Shakespeare and
Dante,' whereto the stupidity of our forefathers tried to
exalt him."²

They attacked, as we will see, the very poetic principle that gave Milton's blank verse its profound impact on the *American* poets of England, Shelley and Keats.

By pamphlets, speeches on education and religious freedom, poetry and diplomacy, John Milton was an inspirer of the English Commonwealth, and he is often damned with the Commonwealth's failure under Oliver Cromwell, whose diplomatic secretary Milton was in the early 1650's. In the aftermath, the "restored" Anglo-Dutch mercantile oligarchy retook a total grip on the British Isles, reestablished the Anglican state-church worship Milton had hated and denounced, and attempted to destroy the new republican institutions in America.

But in the American colonies, Milton had collaborators, correspondents, and readers who regarded him as more the Commonwealth than Cromwell. These included Connecticut Governor John Winthrop, Jr., the Rev. Hugh Peters of Massachusetts, leader of Boston's ministers including John Cotton and his grandson Cotton Mather; and Roger Williams of Rhode Island. The Mather family library contained all Milton's works; their protégé Benjamin Franklin, when he established his first Philadelphia bookshop, sold Milton's writings and urged that they be used in the schools. Later, in the 1760's and 1770's, when Jonathan Mayhew and other Massachusetts ministers were preaching American freedom and independence, they preached from Milton's works, both *Paradise Lost* and his works on civil and church freedom. Mayhew wrote, in a letter of 1760³:

If I understand Milton's principles, they are these. That government, at least our government, is by compact. That a king becoming a tyrant and the compact thereby broken, the power reverts again to the constituents, the people, who may punish such a tyrant as they see fit, and constitute such a new form of government as shall then appear to them to be most expedient.

School texts published in the revolutionary decades drew on Milton to teach public speaking and writing, religion, and morality. Still later, in the 1790's, the Federalists fought the Jacobin Clubs, which had sprung up in imitation of the anarchy of the French Jacobins and through manipulations by their agents. In this fight, the portrayal of the devils' conclave in *Paradise Lost* was used as a metaphor for the Jacobins' targeting of the new American republic.

Master Musician

When Percy Shelley was eighteen, and coming under the influence of all these "sons of light," future American President John Quincy Adams published the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* (1810) which he had given for several years at Harvard College. He drew on Milton's works to show the power of classical speech, as his father had done to show the principles of religious freedom. John Quincy Adams focussed on that quality of Milton's writing which had drawn the attacks of Samuel Johnson and the Enlightenment's leading lights. This was Milton's unique ability to express a single, strong poetic idea over many verses "without stopping" (at the verse-endings), yet still give poetic *music* to those verses, still give distinct force to the beginnings and endings of the lines. John Quincy Adams—a classical scholar who knew that the Greek classical poets began their verses with the most important words—said:

The device of placing the most emphatic word in the front in prose . . . enabled [Milton] to invigorate his thoughts by exhibiting occasionally the strong word at the head of the sentence; but he multiplied the use of this artifice [in poetry—PBG] by presenting it in the front of the line, where its effect is equally striking, and where he could more frequently and easily sweep away from before his frontispiece the rubbish of articles, auxiliaries, pronouns, and prepositions.

T.S. Eliot, after twenty years' attacks on Milton in publications and lectures, was forced to acknowledge the same thing, in a 1947 British Academy lecture:

It is the period [a poetic unit usually of four lines—PBG], the sentence and still more the paragraph, that is the unit of Milton's verse; and emphasis on the line structure is the minimum necessary to provide him a counter-pattern to the period structure. . . . It is his ability to give a perfect and unique pattern to every paragraph, such that the full

* Milton's original spelling, unique in its day, has been preserved. Milton used spelling to indicate how the language ought to sound.—Ed.

beauty of the line is found in its longer context, and his ability to work in larger musical units than any other poet—that is the most conclusive evidence of Milton's supreme mastery.

We will see later how laughable Eliot's "attack" on this, wherein he complains that Milton's poetry must be read once for the music—the sound—, and then back through again, this time for the meaning; as if the human mind were incapable of such a sweep of beautiful thought. The blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton made poetry's essence clear: not sound, rhyme, rhythm, or other adornments; but the beautiful expression of *ideas*, metaphors expressed as freely as powerfully, in a meter of verses which measures the rate of change and development of thought. Here is an example from *Paradise Lost*, an extended image of the mind of Satan as he steals into the Garden of Eden. Not just the beginning of each verse, but more especially the end, is an emphatic word yet nearly always projected into the next verse as well:

Begins his dire attempt, which nigh the birth
Now rowling, boiles in his tumultuous brest,*
And like a devilish Engin back recoiles
Upon himself; horror and doubt distract
His troubl'd thoughts, and from the bottom stirr
The Hell within him, for within him Hell
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell
One step no more then from himself can fly
By change of place: Now conscience wakes despair
That slumberd, wakes the bitter memorie
Of what he was, what is, and what must be
Worse; of worse deeds worse sufferings must ensue.

—Book IV, lines 15-26

Milton's Satan is one of literature's most controversial characters, and Milton himself was attacked by his literary enemies as a Satanist, because he portrayed Satan not as an implacable, primordial evil force, but as the greatest of fallen angels. He is worst and lowest because he was once the noblest, and gave over the good for pride and power. He exists in evil despair because he will not repent, nor change, and must pull down mankind in order to rule. He is the pure oligarchy, willfully evil for the sake of power; and he is sin itself. How do these lines evoke the torment and tumult hammering at his mind, and the great danger such a mind threatens? Imagine yourself *listening* to these lines, or read them aloud to yourself. Your ear picks up the meter of the verses, the repeated length of ten syllables; your mind expects thoughts to complete themselves in the lines, as in the familiar Shakespeare sonnet:

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate, . . .

But no—at the end of nearly every verse, Milton ambushes and surprises your mind with a powerful verb or noun which *sounds as if it were concluding one thought, but simultaneously begins to draw a second thought out of the first*. Your mind repeatedly “thinks again” as the verse-endings echo and re-echo. These verse-endings are distinct, emphatic, here some are fiercely pronounced—yet they also make continuous speech and thought with the verse following. The music of the verse pauses; the thought rushes on, unfolding.

To see the force of this poetic style of Milton, rewrite these same lines, retaining every expression, but constraining every thought to end with the meter of a line. Hear how the continuous development of the poetic thought in Milton, becomes retarded and begins to break into pieces:

And now his dire attempt begins to roll;
At birth it boils in his tumultuous breast,
And then recoils back upon itself,
Like a devilish engine of doubt and horror;
His troubled thoughts distract, and from below
Stir up the Hell that in himself he brings;
For Hell is deep within and round about him,
He cannot fly a single step from Hell,
No more than from himself, by change of place.
Now conscience wakes his slumbering despair,
The bitter memory of what he was,
Of what he is and what worse he must be,
For from worse deeds, worse suffering must ensue.

You hear a steady, rocking *rhythm* creeping in, which slows your thought, your mind tending to stop and *lose the train of thought* at the end of each verse. Now, worse, add rhyme-endings, two-by-two, and you will have the Enlightenment style dominant in English poetry for three hundred years—and you will be asleep, although your eyes may keep moving back and forth over the lines. John Dryden, the most celebrated Enlightenment poet, re-wrote *Paradise Lost* in exactly such rhymed couplets *while Milton still lived*, and published his version as *The Loss of Innocence* in 1670, to try to strangle in the cradle Milton's epic and the influence it would have.

Milton's poetic style of “suspension between the verses” sustains the entire twelve books of *Paradise Lost*, and its exemplars are everywhere. From the famous “prayer to light” opening Book III, in which the blind poet asks the help of his Muse:

Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,
Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam
May I express thee unblam'd? since God is Light,
And never but in approached Light
Dwelt from Eternitie, dwelt then in thee,
Bright effluence of bright essence increate. . . .
Before the Heav'ns thou wert, and at the voice
Of God, as with a Mantle didst invest
The rising world of waters dark and deep,
Won from the void and formless infinite.

—Book III, lines 1-12

At the most lyrical moments of the epic, Milton combines these suspensions with other, more deliberate verse-endings, internal repetitions, and slower rhythms, yet the ambiguities and echoes that make you “think again” at the suspended line-endings, are still there. Eve speaks to Adam, before their fall:

With thee conversing I forget all time,
All seasons and thir change, all please alike.
Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
With charm of earliest Birds; pleasant the Sun
When first on this delightful Land he spreads
His orient Beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flour
Glistring with dew; fragrant the fertil earth
After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
Of grateful Eevening milde, then silent Night
With this her solemn Bird and this fair Moon,
And these the Gemms of Heav'n, her starrie train: . . .

—Book IV, lines 639-649

At the most dramatic turns, the poetic ideas unfold with suspensions at the end and beginning of nearly all verses; as when Satan, the oligarch, first glimpses the upstart, new-created common man, “trespassing” on the angels' ancient Paradise:

O Hell! what doe mine eyes with grief behold,
Into our room of bliss thus high advanc't
Creatures of other mould, earth-born perhaps,
Not Spirits, yet to heav'nly Spirits bright
Little inferior; whom my thoughts pursue
With wonder, and could love, so lively shines
In them Divine resemblance, and such grace
The hand that formed them on thir shape hath pourd.
Ah gentle pair, ye little think how nigh
Your change approaches, when all these delights
Will vanish and deliver ye to woe, . . .
And should I at your harmless innocence
Melt, as I doe, yet public reason just,
Honour and Empire with revenge enlarg'd,
By conquering this new World, compells me now
To do what else though damnd I should abhorre.

—Book IV, lines 358-392



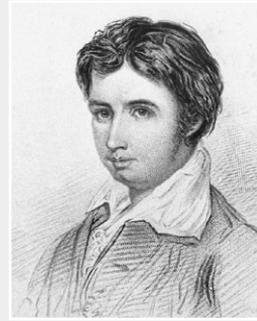
John Keats

The Granger Collection

Percy Bysshe Shelley



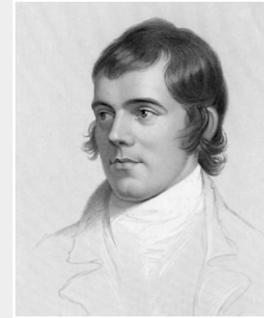
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Republican poets of the American Revolutionary period.

To an American leader like John Quincy Adams, a lover of the classics and believer in the creative power immanent in each human mind, Milton's poetry was the joining of musical, beautiful verse to forceful, natural public speech. This was oratory to awake and move citizens' minds. To T.S. Eliot, American expatriate who became a British Anglo-Catholic "aristocrat" and the Twentieth century's most famous existentialist poet, this quality was intolerable:

To extract everything possible from *Paradise Lost*, it would seem necessary to read it in two different ways; first solely for the sound, and second for the sense. The full beauty of the long periods can hardly be enjoyed while we are wrestling with the meaning as well; and for the pleasure of the ear, the meaning is hardly necessary.⁴

The same mind can, of course, hear music and the development of a *true idea* at the same time, and this is the source of the joy of poetry such as this.

Dr. Samuel Johnson, the Enlightenment's most celebrated literary critic and the leading enemy of Milton in the Eighteenth century, made the very same attack:

His [Milton's] variety of pauses, so much boasted by the lovers of blank verse, changes the measures of an English poet to the periods of a declaimer [an orator—PBG]; and there are only a few skillful and happy readers of Milton, who enable their audience to perceive where the lines end or begin.⁵

President Adams must have been one of those "skillful and happy readers of Milton," among so many Americans who were. One who reads the blank verse of Shakespeare or Milton *guided by the idea of the poet*, does not "lose" the meter of the lines the poet has used. One who dwells on the unexpected smile of the Mona Lisa, against the infinite distance of the landscape behind her,

does not "lose" Leonardo's structure of perspective lines and vanishing points—they are there. But Dr. Johnson's Enlightenment poetry, or the later Romantic poetry of Wordsworth *et al.*, is like a carefully constructed cross-grid of perspective lines—with little, or nothing, painted against it! And so Dr. Johnson had to rail against the verse of Milton:

Throughout all [Milton's] greater works, there prevails a uniformity of diction, a mode and cast of expression which bears little resemblance to that of any former writer; and which is so far removed from common use, that a reader, when he first opens the book, finds himself surprised by a new language.⁶

Milton, an accomplished musician and son of a classical composer, knew that he possessed a unique poetic ability, and called it "the inspired gift of God rarely bestowed, but yet to some in every nation . . . to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and public civility." He understood that it dwelt in precisely what we have described here: the unique power to suspend poetic thought between verses and over many verses, against the counter-melody of the individual line meter with its inversions and repetitions. He also understood that this was no "new language," but the ancient language of classical poetry which Dryden and his ilk were destroying. Knowing about Dryden's vicious rewrite of *Paradise Lost* into rhymed couplets, Milton made himself clear with this Preface placed before the second, 1674 edition of his great epic:

THE VERSE: The measure is English heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greek and of Virgil in Latin, rhyme being . . . the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter. . . . Not without cause, then, some both Italian and Spanish poets of prime note have rejected rhyme both in longer and shorter works,

as have also long since our best English tragedies, as a thing, of itself, to all judicious ears trivial and of no musical delight; which [delight] consists only in apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables, *and the sense variously drawn out from one verse into another*, not in the jingling sound of like endings, a fault avoided by the learned ancients both in poetry and all good oratory. [emphasis added—PBG]

Milton's words have the hard ring of old truth in Y2000 America, where poetry has degenerated to the aggressive shouting of senseless strings of rhymes, from bar and nightclub stages or recording studios, and politicians hurl one-line sound bites at focus groups as the modern form of "oratory."

'Sire of an immortal strain'

In the period of the worldwide impact of the American Revolution, Percy Shelley, John Keats, and Scotland's national poet Robert Burns, broke free of the two hundred years of cynical and foppish rhyming that was Enlightenment English poetry. It was the revolutionary time of which Shelley wrote, in his *Defence of Poetry*, that it suddenly made countless individuals capable of "communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature"; thus, open to the power of poetry.

In reviving a new classical poetry, Shelley and Keats went back to Milton (although also to Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare). Both conceived of new English epic poems which would recast *Paradise Lost* for this revolutionary time, in an ecumenical form outside the explicitly Christian conception of Milton's epic. Keats's was *Hyperion*, which he did not complete, but which, Shelley was sure, would have been his greatest work. Shelley's was *The Revolt of Islam* (1817), and then his re-working of the idea as a tragedy in lyrical verse, his famous *Prometheus Unbound* (1821). *The Revolt of Islam*, an epic of extraordinary beauty which closes with a celebration of the American republic, brought the British literary/political world down upon Shelley's head, and forced him to exile the last five years of his life in Italy. In its Preface, Shelley wrote:

I have adopted the stanza of Spenser (a measure inexpressibly beautiful) not because I consider it a finer model of poetical harmony than the blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton, but because in the latter there is no shelter for mediocrity; you must succeed or fail. . . . Should the public judge that my composition is worthless, I shall indeed bow before the tribunal from which Milton received his crown of immortality

Keats's particular genius was that he could use rhyme, even rhymed couplets, as if it were "the blank verse of Shakespeare and Milton." He grasped the Miltonian style of "suspending thought between the verses" so thoroughly, that his rhymes did not make *endings*, but rather served to emphasize *transitions*; they became verbs, by which the poetic idea changed and developed. The opening lines of another epic, his *Endymion*, give an example of this:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'erdarkened ways
Made for our searching; yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. . . .

A listener or reader may notice only preconsciously, that the words rhymed are strongly contrasted: "joy forever," an abstraction, rhymed with an action, "will never pass"; another action, "will keep," rhymed with another abstraction, "a sleep." Although the verses suspend a single developing thought, emphasis on the end-rhymes creates more "second thoughts" in the listener; the apparently simple truism of the first line becomes an idea of *immortality* by the end of the first five-line "period."

Keats at eighteen had already written a sonnet showing his keen insight into this poetic principle, the sonnet to his political-prisoner friend and mentor, Leigh Hunt. Hear how the rhymed endings of lines 2-3, because of the way they are suspended in a thought (whose subject and verb they are, "yet has he . . . been as free"), lift the poem suddenly into the realm of passion and beauty:

Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison

What though, for telling truth to flatter'd state,
Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he
In his immortal spirit, been as free
As the sky-searching lark, and as elate.
Minion of grandeur! think you he did wait?
Think you he naught but prison walls did see,
Till, so unwilling, thou unturn'dst the key?
Ah, no! far happier, nobler was his fate!

In Spenser's halls he stray'd, and bowers fair,
 Culling enchanted flowers; and he flew
 With daring Milton through fields of air:
 To regions of his own his genius true
 Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair
 When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew?

In 1628, at about twenty himself, Milton had composed an extraordinary short poem in rhymed couplets, which already showed the power of his poetic style to suspend complex thoughts over musical intervals; fittingly, it was a poem of praise and wonder at Shakespeare's works. Written when the first monument to Shakespeare had been erected at Stratford-upon-Avon by his fellow playwrights, the poem appears to say what has been said a thousand times at the graves or monuments of great human beings: He needs no monument, his work itself is his eternal monument. The first eight lines say this, in four discrete rhymed couplets, almost in the style Dr. Johnson preferred. But *then*—over the remaining eight verses is suspended a single, surprising new idea: Shakespeare's true eternity is in his audience, the spectator struck motionless by thought awakening in his mind, "made marble" like a classical sculpture of a human being in thought. No king can have such a monument; it belongs to the artist alone, who brings us to truth through beauty:

On *Shakespear*. 1630

What needs my *Shakespear* for his honour'd Bones,
 The labour of an age in piled Stones,
 Or that his hallow'd reliques should be hid
 Beneath a Star-ypointing *Pyramid*?
 Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,
 What need'st thou such weak witnes of thy name?
 Thou in our wonder and astonishment
 Hast built thy self a live-long Monument.
 For whilst to th' shame of slow-endeavouring art,
 Thy easie numbers flow, and that each heart
 Hath from the leaves of thy unvalu'd Book,
 Those Delphick lines with deep impression took,
 Then thou our fancy of it self bereaving,
 Dost make us Marble with too much conceaving;
 And so Sepulcher'd in such pomp dost lie,
 That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.

When Shelley, in "Adonais," wrote of Milton "who was the sire of an immortal strain," he knew that he himself, and Keats, were of that strain. "Adonais" was Shelley's reaction to the tragic death of Keats at 25, in 1821; when he finished it, Shelley wrote that in honor-

ing Keats, he had composed his own best work of poetry. It is clear that "Adonais" has that Miltonic style of expression which Samuel Johnson attacked as complex and Italianate, and which T.S. Eliot denounced as "translated Latin." Clear, also, that Shelley was thinking of Milton's poem, "Lycidas," a tribute after the death at sea of Milton's own youthful friend and fellow poet, Edward King.

from 'Lycidas'

For *Lycidas* is dead, dead ere his prime
 Young *Lycidas*, and hath not left his peer:
 Who would not sing for *Lycidas*? he well knew
 Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
 He must not flote upon his watry bear
 Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
 Without the meed of som melodious tear. . . .
 Weep no more, woful Shepherds weep no more,
 For *Lycidas* your sorrow is not dead,
 Sunk though he be beneath the watry floor,
 So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed, . . .

from 'Adonais'

Oh, weep for Adonais—he is dead!
 Wake, melancholy Mother, wake and weep!
 Yet wherefore? Quench within their burning bed
 Thy fiery tears, and let thy loud heart keep
 Like his, a mute and uncomplaining sleep;
 For he is gone, where all things wise and fair
 Descend;—oh, dream not that the amorous Deep
 Will yet restore him to the vital air;
 Death feeds on his mute voice, and laughs at our despair.

The Measure of Freedom

The composition of great classical poetry in each language, elevates that language to its highest level of literate expression, and becomes the possession of all its speakers. This is the subject of Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (*On the Eloquence of the Vernacular*); how great poetry thus acts for the betterment of mankind is developed by Lyndon LaRouche in *On the Subject of Education*.⁷ He emphasizes that poetry acts on the expressiveness of language, not through sounds, rhymes, rhythms, etc.; but through the way the poem brings its audience to *discover a new idea*—most especially, those ideas appropriate to the love of truth and of freedom of each individual to find and hold to the truth.

Among speakers of English, the rise of both literacy and freedom has been bound up most with great works of blank verse, through which the reader most easily

expresses and understands the new idea, the impassioned conception of the poet. Shelley named the great works of this tradition in his Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*, when he wrote of

the mighty intellects of our own country that succeeded the Reformation, the translators of the Bible, Shakespeare, Spenser, the dramatist of the reign of Elizabeth. . . . Milton stood alone in the age which he illumined.

And, in his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*,

We owe the great writers of the golden age of our own literature to that fervid awakening of the public mind which shook to dust the oldest and most oppressive form of the Christian religion. We owe Milton to the progress and development of the same spirit: the sacred Milton was, let it ever be remembered, a republican and a bold enquirer into morals and religion.

Virtually the words of President John Adams twenty years earlier.

Freedom, then, to discover and hold to the truth, is what both Shelley, and President Adams, found expressed best in the blank verse of Milton. To hear this poetic voice used by Shelley, listen to the extraordinary verses which open *Prometheus Unbound*, whereby the chained and tortured benefactor of mankind, Prometheus, confronts the tyrant Zeus:

PROMETHEUS:

Monarch of Gods and Demons, and all Spirits
But One, who throng those bright and rolling worlds
Which Thou and I alone of living things
Behold with sleepless eyes! regard this Earth
Made multitudinous with thy slaves, whom thou
Requiest for knee-worship, prayer, and praise,
And toil, and hecatombs of broken hearts,
With fear and self-contempt and barren hope.
Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless in hate,
Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn,
O'er mine own misery and thy vain revenge.

What a pungent shock is delivered by the placement of that “But One” at the beginning of the second verse, completely changing the idea which the listener thought was concluded by “and all Spirits.” The same kind of transition occurs at the end of the second verse; and Shelley puts Zeus and Prometheus, slavery and freedom, in confrontation over the entire world, in three-and-a-half lines of verse!

The triumph of freedom of mind, over physical and material power and injustice, is also the conception of Milton’s beautiful tragedy in verse, *Samson Agonistes*,

well-known to Shelley. Now, listen to the opening of that tragedy, where the chained Samson, prisoner of the Philistines, describes his apparent fate:

O, wherefore was my birth from Heav’n foretold
Twice by an Angel, who at last in sight
Of both my Parents all in flames ascended
From off the Altar, where an Off’ring burn’d,
As in a fiery column charioting
His Godlike presence, and from some great act
Or benefit reveal’d to *Abraham’s* race?
Why was my breeding order’d and prescrib’d
As of a person separate to God,
Design’d for great exploits; if I must dye
Betray’d, Captiv’d, and both my Eyes put out,
Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze;
To grind in Brazen Fetters under task
With this Heav’n-gifted strength? O glorious strength,
Put to the labour of a Beast, debas’t
Lower then bondslave! Promise was that I
Should *Israel* from *Philistian* yoke deliver;
Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in *Gaza* at the Mill with slaves, . . .

The same voice, even some of the same expressions, which came to Shelley for his Promethean tragedy. In the Twentieth century, poetry was written in every imitative form and style—but not this one, driven from the schools, stages, and bookstalls by the existentialists and critics. But it is the freest form, most governed by the rule of ideas. So, Shelley wrote:

I have sought therefore to write, as I believe that Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton wrote, with an utter disregard of anonymous censure.⁸

* * *

1. Letter quoted in Lydia Schulman, “John Milton’s American Legacy,” *The Campaigner*, July 1981 (Pt. 1) and October 1981 (Pt. 2) (Vol. 14, Nos. 4 and 7).
2. Ezra Pound, *The Egoist*, 1917.
3. Quoted in Barbara Dreyfuss, “John Milton and the American Republic,” unpublished ms.
4. T.S. Eliot, “On the Verse of Milton,” in *Essays and Studies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936). What an irony, that those who have taken Eliot’s poetry seriously, must read *it* just as he describes. The first time through is for the “images,” sounds, and clever, tongue-in-cheek rhymes (“In the room the women come and go, / Talking of Michelangelo”). The second time—equipped with etymologies, mythologies, and anthologies, thesauri and encyclopaediae, dictionaries and commentaries, critical texts and subtexts—is to try to figure out, “What on earth does it mean?”
5. Quoted in Eliot, *ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “On the Subject of Education,” *Executive Intelligence Review*, Dec. 17, 1999 (Vol. 26, No. 50).
8. Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*.