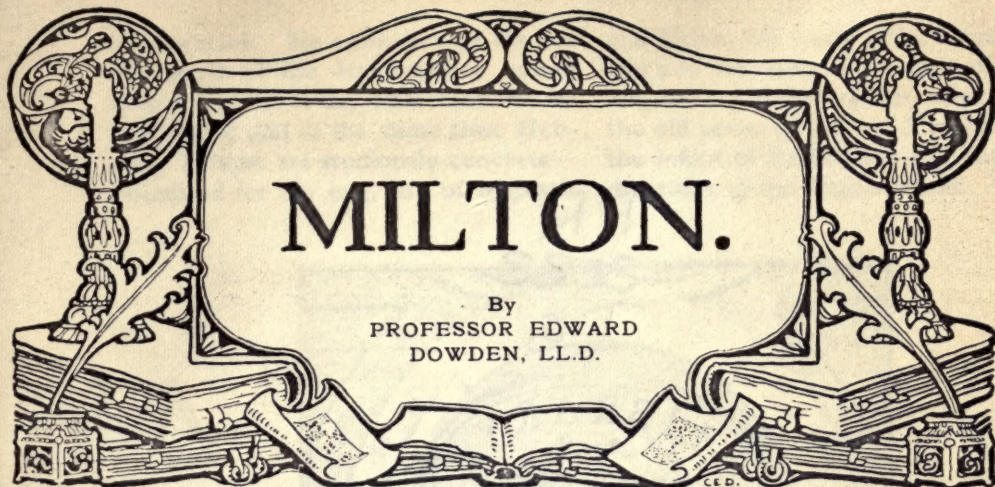


Dowden, Edward
Milton

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MILTON'S soaring spirit, which Wordsworth likened to a star, must not make us forget his senses, framed for rich and delicate pleasures. The eye, while sight was his, the ear, the sense of smell, the sense of taste, were with him inlets of delight. The Puritan poet expressly rejected the common doctrine that soul and body are distinct and different in kind; the whole man is for him indivisibly one. He honours the joys of wedlock as sacred. He is the least morose, the least ascetic of poets. The fact that his life, viewed as a whole, was dedicated to great ends and had a continuity of purpose that is rare has obscured the fact that he was in a high degree sensitive and impulsive. The last page of Garnett's little biography of Milton—a far juster appreciation of the man and his work than the life by Mark Pattison—dwells on this point. In 1734 Jonathan Richardson wrote of Milton—"He was always in haste," and he goes on to quote the poet's own words, from the "Letter to Diodatus"—"Such is the impetuosity of my temper, that no delay, no quiet, no different care and thought of almost anything else, can stop me till I come to my journey's end, and finish the present study to the utmost I am able." In his wooing Milton was as precipitate

as Shelley; in the rupture with his wife he was far more precipitate. His vehemence in politics was more unqualified than the vehemence of Shelley. He steadied himself by devotion to great ends and worthy causes. He regarded himself—too much, perhaps—as a dedicated person; but without the help of this lofty self-consciousness, his temperament might have wrecked Milton in mid-career. Yet it is not to be supposed that his steadfastness of aim made him rigid or unsocial. "He was delightful company," said his daughter, "the life of the conversation, and that on account of a flow of subject, and an unaffected cheerfulness and civility."

In his writings on matters of national interest he is not to be regarded as a practical politician, who is satisfied with the second best because the best is unattainable, but rather as a poet or a seer setting forth the highest ideals, ideals of domestic life, of education, of civil and ecclesiastical liberty. And it was he, the Puritan poet, who dreamed of an organisation of the pleasures of England under the superintendence of an enlightened government. If his soul, as Wordsworth declares, "dwelt apart," it was only because he took a more comprehensive view of the national well-being than any of his con-

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THE BIBLIOPHILE

temporaries. He embodies in his art the spirit of the Renaissance united with the spirit of the Reformation; he is Hellenic and at the same time Hebraic. It is an art studiously concrete—visualised for the eye, full of majestic

and Satan, the Lady and Comus, Samson and Harapha, the spirit of gaiety and the temper of genius, which is, in the old sense of the word, melancholic, the infant of Bethlehem and the fallen divinities of the Pagan world. Hence,



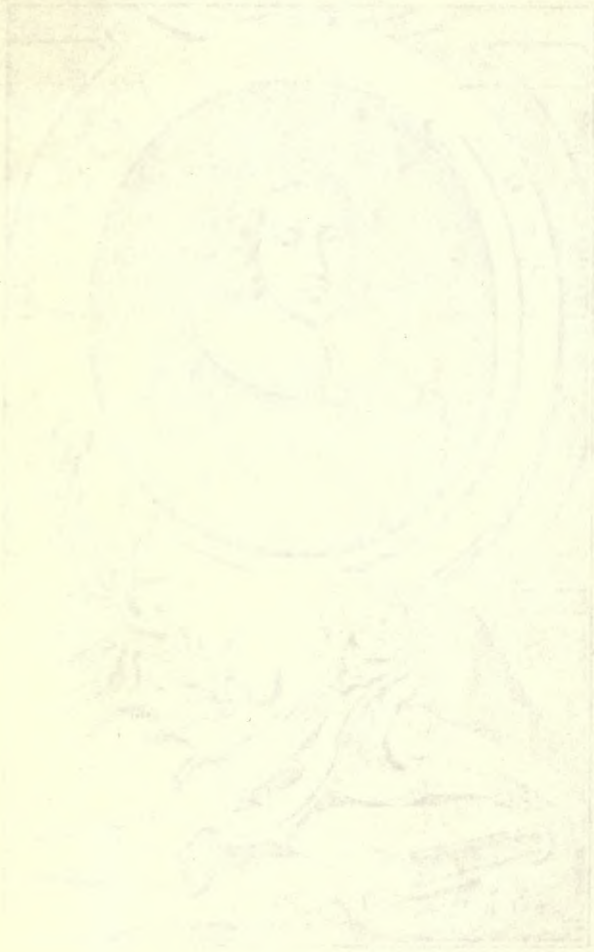
MILTON AS A YOUTH
FROM AN ENGRAVING BY HOUBRAKEN 1741

harmonies for the ear—yet founded upon somewhat abstract conceptions. And these abstractions lend themselves to impressive effects of contrast—darkness and light, heaven and hell, the righteous and the fallen angels, Christ

as compared with Shakespeare, his conceptions of life and character are simple and lack the complexity of actual character and real life; hence they are less instructive; but they are hardly less inspiring.

THE BIRLTONS

temperance. His embodied in his art the spirit of the Renaissance united with the spirit of the Reformation; he and the temper of genius which led to the old sense of the word, metaphoric. The intent of Birlton and the latter the artist of the Tegan world. It was



is rooted for the ear, yet founded as a... upon somewhat abstract conceptions... And their abstractions find themselves... to progressive effects of contrast... ness and light, heaven and hell... righteous and the fallen angels, Christ...

aims to something of prophetic air. The separation of early manuscript and its inclusion in the more advanced years of Milton's life. For such an aim as Milton's life of unintermitted industry is itself a source of joy and satisfaction; and although he felt called on during many years to labour with his fellow-labourers, the hands that wrote those lines at the value of a hour's continuity, it is hard to put that very source of industry in a nation's life. Liberty and justice were these ends, and he would have the eye and foot up to the word, each word as he could meet it in the world; he cast off his English robes and put on his buff coat of Greece, but his greater joy was to be in that hour which all jolly poets spend. He would not have been Milton had he done other-wise, and once engaged in study he would have been other than himself. If his passions had not been so great, his prose writings and the writings of a poet not because they include occasional passages of almost unmatchable eloquence; they are a poet's work because the central conception of those which have permanent value are the proper; and even the sacred, resulting from which some of them are distinguished do not so much resemble the violence of the classical scholar in an age when the mountains of Karsak-ance learned for each other in their spirit, as they resemble the uprightness and nobility of a troubled seveneenth-century English against the seventeenth-century pursuit of Basil. There is not a more terrible wild level to know, Milton's prose, than your line of an ideal in a passion; and while he may be touched in the least extent with of personal self-interest, he will care as if he were nothing less than the sacred representative of a sacred cause or idea.

Milton's temperament was actually joyous, and could be had taken on any day he was anxious in an extraordinary degree - that is he was in his hope for the speedy realization by the English people of his ideal of a national religious, free, strong, dignified, and enlightened. Even when oppressed soon in darkness with dangers he was sustained by that faith in human effort, under the guidance of Divine Providence, which is expressed by the words of Samson Agonistes: "A belief or disappointed ideal, he was a risk of becoming sacrificed or even cynical. In all Milton's writings, while it is true that indignation often breaks the bounds, there is no touch of the cynic. His youth was one of earnest and joyous self-culture; he felt called not for his own sake merely, but with a view to some great achievement. His mind was not filled with the joys of the companion chamber of liberty, champion of England, and he could not exist in the loss of what he called "his Liberty's defence." His later years were devoted to the accomplishment of the dramatic designs and prophecies of his youth. The joys from that to last were endless, and might almost be called poetry. That to some extent remains but from our common, facile sympathies; but he aspired towards those highest delights, in whose company there is something of awe.

The situation, of course, is great from the writer of "L'Allegro" to the writer of "Samson Agonistes." It is worth noting the change calls forth no feeling of pity but rather that of a noble pride:

"I have not been content to walk
 In the young poet's constrained prison

in the young poet's constrained prison in the highest joys are those described in "L'Allegro," and the hope for old age is expressed in that it "may

MILTON

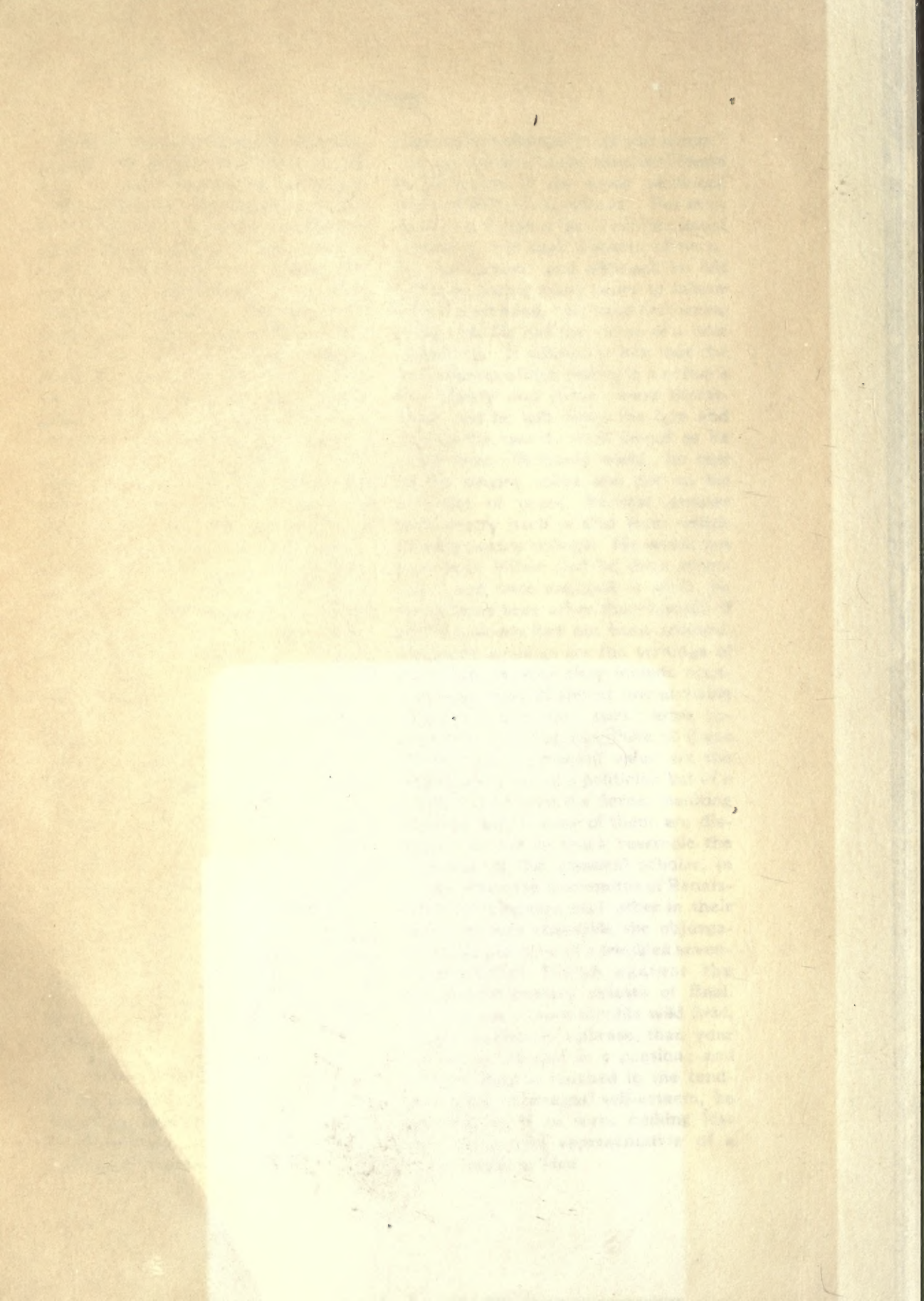
Milton's temperament was naturally joyous, and until he had fallen on evil days he was sanguine in an extraordinary degree—idealist as he was—in his hopes for the speedy realization by the English people of his vision of a nation, righteous, free, strong, disciplined, and enlightened. Even when compassed round in darkness with dangers, he was sustained by that faith in human effort, under the guidance of divine Providence, which is expressed by the Chorus of "Samson Agonistes." A foiled or disappointed idealist runs a risk of becoming embittered or even cynical. In all Milton's writings, while it is true that indignation often breaks the bounds, there is no touch of the cynic. His youth was one of aspiring and joyous self-culture—self-culture not for its own sake merely, but with a view to some great achievement. His mid-manhood was filled with the joys of the combatant champion of liberty, champion of England, and he could even exult in the loss of sight sustained "in Liberty's defence, my noble task." His elder years were happy in the accomplishment of the dreams and designs and prophecies of his youth. His joys from first to last were arduous, and might almost be called severe. That to some extent removes him from our common, facile sympathies; but he aspired towards those highest delights, in whose countenances there is something of awe.

The alteration, of course, is great from the writer of "L'Allegro" to the writer of "Samson Agonistes." If viewed aright, the change calls forth no feeling of pity but rather that of a noble pride:—

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail,
Or knock the breast.

In the young poet's contrasted pieces the higher joys are those described in "Il Penseroso," and the hope for old age there expressed is that it "may

attain to something of prophetic strain." The aspiration of early manhood found its fulfilment in the more advanced years of Milton's blindness. For such an one as Milton a life of uninterrupted continuity is in itself a source of peculiar satisfaction: and although he felt called on during many years to labour with his left hand—the hand that wrote prose—his life had the virtue of a rare continuity. It seemed to him that the very sources of high poetry in a nation's life—liberty and virtue—were threatened, and he laid down the lyre and took up the sword—such sword as he could most effectively wield; he cast off his singing robes and put on his buff-coat of prose, because greater than poetry itself is that from which all lofty poetry springs. He would not have been Milton had he done otherwise, and once engaged in strife, he would have been other than himself if all his passions had not been aroused. His prose writings are the writings of a poet not because they include occasional passages of almost unmatchable eloquence; they are a poet's work because the central conceptions of those which have permanent value are the conceptions, not of a politician but of a prophet; and even the fierce, insulting rages by which some of them are disfigured do not so much resemble the violences of the classical scholar, in an age when the mammoths of Renaissance learning tore each other in their slime, as they resemble the objurgations and mockery of a troubled seventeenth-century Elijah against the seventeenth-century priests of Baal. There is not a more terrible wild fowl, to borrow Bottom's phrase, than your lion of an idealist in a passion; and while he may be touched in the tenderest spots of personal self-esteem, he will roar as if he were nothing less than the sacred representative of a sacred cause or idea.



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