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3 What It’s Like to Read L’Allegro and Il Penseroso

STANLEY FISH

‘What It’s Like to Read L’Allegro and Il Penseroso’ is, along with the essay on Bacon’s essays in Self-Consuming Artifacts, a relatively pure instance of early reader-response criticism. Part of its purity inheres in its claim to provide an instance of the methodological superiority of reader-response criticism. Indeed in the second half of the essay (not reprinted here) I claim that the analysis of temporal experience rather than of spatial structure ‘provides a firm basis for the resolving of critical controversies’. In short, I was claiming objectivity for the method and only later did I come to see that it was no method at all but a practice that depended as much as any other on a set of largely unarticulated assumptions about the nature of mind, the structure of time, the operations of consciousness, etc. In some ways I would now think of the presentation as, if not dishonest, at least staged. The suggestion, for example, is that readings of pastoral by Tuve and Rosenmeyer merely confirmed the independent findings of my analysis. But I suspect that the truth is that those readings were very much in my mind, and therefore directing my mind when the analysis was undertaken, and that therefore the entire enterprise was much less new than I wanted to believe. What was new and remains valuable, I think, was the asking of another question about two poems that had been interrogated by countless others before me. Today were I to return to the poems, I would ask still other questions and they would be generated by my recent interest in Milton’s corpus as a working out of the implications of an antinomian theology. In the context of that theology, questions of freedom and constraint, feminine and masculine postures, theories of political action, etc., would now come to the foreground; whereas in the essay written over twenty years ago, they are slighted in favour of a passion for theory that has happily abated.

I have only one point to make and everything else follows from it: L’Allegro is easier to read than Il Penseroso. This I assume is hardly news, but if one were a subscriber to the Times Literary Supplement in 1934, the matter might seem to be shrouded in considerable doubt, for on October 18 of that year J.P. Curgenven initiated a remarkable correspondence by asking and answering the question, ‘Who comes to the window in L’Allegro, line 46?’ [After many weeks in which different candidates are proposed], the controversy ends on November 29 with a letter from W.A. Jones, The County School, Cardiganshire, who reports that his classes of schoolchildren ‘invariably and without noticing any difficulty understand the lines’ (p. 856). Whether or not the editors took this as a comment on the entire affair is a matter of conjecture, but at any rate they append a footnote to Jones’s letter: ‘We cannot continue this correspondence.’

The point is, of course, that this correspondence could have been continued indefinitely, but even in its abbreviated form, it allows us to make some observations.
1. The proponent of each reading makes concessions, usually by acknowledging that there is evidence for the readings he opposes.
2. Each critic is able to point to details which do in fact support his position.
3. But in order fully to support his respective position every one of the critics is moved to make sense of the lines by supplying connections more firm and delimiting than the connections available in the text.
4. The making of sense always involves an attempt to arrange the images and events of the passage into a sequence of logical action.

What are we to make of all this? If the entire exchange proves anything, it is that Milton does not wish to bind us to any one of these interpretations. I do not mean that he left us free to choose whatever interpretation we might prefer, but that he left us free not to choose, or more simply, that he left us free. As Brooks and Hardy observe, the reader of these lines ‘is hurried through a series of infinitives . . . the last of which is completely ambiguous in its subject.’ I would only add that the ambiguity is so complete that unless someone asks us to, we do not worry about it, and we do not worry about it (or even notice it) because while no subject is specified for ‘come,’ any number of subjects – lark, poet, Mirth, Dawn, Night – are available. What is not available is the connecting word or sustained syntactical unit which would pressure us to decide between them, and in the absence of that pressure, we are not obliged to decide. Nor are we obliged to decide between the different

(and plausible) sequences which choosing any one of these subjects
would generate.
1. If it is the lark who comes to the window, he does so while the cock
‘with lively din’ scatters the rear of darkness thin and the two birds thus
perform complementary actions.
2. If it is the Dawn that comes to the window, she does so while the
cock with lively din scatters the rear of darkness thin and is thus faithful
to our understanding of the relationship between cock’s crowing and
dawn.
3. If it is the poet (L’Allegro) who comes to the window, he does so in
response to lark, cock, and dawn: that is, while they are performing their
related functions.
4. And if it is Mirth who comes to the window, the action allies her
with lark, cock, and dawn in the awakening of L’Allegro.

All of these readings hang on the word ‘while’ in line 49, but since
‘while’ is less time-specific than other temporal adverbs, it does not
firmly call for any of these and, more to the point, it functions equally
well, that is, equally loosely, in all of them. Rather than insisting on a
clear temporal relationship among the events it connects, ‘while’ acts as a
fulcrum around which those events swirl, supplying just enough of a
sense of order to allow us to continue, but not so much that we feel
compelled to arrange the components of the passage into an intelligible
sequence. In short, ‘while’ neither directs nor requires choice; instead, it
freed us from choice and allows us – and I mean this literally – to be
careless. This is also the effect of the two ‘ors’ in the preceding couplet:
‘Through the sweetbriar or the vine, Or the twisted eglandine.’ The ‘ors’
divide alternative images, each of which registers only for a split second
before it is supplanted by the next. We are neither committed to any one
of them, nor required to combine them into a single coherent picture.
The effect of the couplet extends both backward – softening the outline of
the window and of whoever or whatever has come to it – and forward –
removing the pressure of specificity from the weakly transitional ‘while’.

I intend the phrase ‘weakly transitional’ precisely: for it exactly
captures the balance Milton achieves by deploying his connectives. If
there were no transitions, the freedom of the poem’s experience would
become a burden, since a reader would first notice it and then worry
about it; and if the transitions were firmly directing, a reading would be
obliged to follow the directions they gave. Milton has it both ways, just
as he does with a syntax that is not so much ambiguous as it is loose.
Twentieth-century criticism has taught us to value ambiguities because
they are meaningful, but these ambiguities, if they can be called that,
protect us from meaning by protecting us from working. They are there,
not to be noticed, but to assure that whatever track a reader happens to
come in on, he will have no trouble keeping to it; no choice that he

makes (of lark, poet, Goddess, etc.) will conflict with a word or a phrase
that he meets later. Anything fits with anything else, so that it is never
necessary to go back and retrace one’s effortless steps.

Rosmond Tuve has written that the pleasures enumerated in L’Allegro
all have ‘the flat absence of any relation to responsibility which we
sometimes call innocence.’ What I am suggesting is that the experience
of reading the poem is itself such a pleasure, involving just that absence;
for at no point are we held responsible for an action or an image beyond
the moment of its fleeting appearance in a line or a couplet. Moreover it
is a flat absence in the sense that we are not even aware of having been
relieved of it. That is why Cleanth Brooks is not quite right when he
declares that the unremarked pleasures of L’Allegro ‘can be had for the
asking,’ they can be had without asking.

Critics have always been aware of the curious discreteness that
characterizes L’Allegro, both as an object and as an experience, but in
general they have responded either by downgrading the poem, so
capable, as D.C. Allen observes, of ‘desultory rearrangement,’ or by
attempting to rescue it from the charge of disunity and fragmentation. In
1958 Robert Graves went so far as to suggest that in the course of
composing L’Allegro Milton misplaced sixteen lines, probably over the
weekend. The lines beginning ‘Oft listening’ (53) and ending with every
shepherd telling his tale under the hawthorn in the dale (68) originally
followed the account of the Lubber fiend as ‘Crop full out of the door he
flings, Ere the first cock his matins rings’ (113–14). By restoring the
original order, Graves asserts, we make the poem very much less of a
‘muddle’ (that is, we make sense of it). Otherwise, he points out, we are
left with this improbable sequence of events:

While distractedly bidding good-morrow, at the window, to Mirth,
with one ear cocked for the hounds and horn . . . [he] sometimes, we
are told, ‘goes walking, not unseen, by hedgerow elms, on hillocks green.’
Either Milton had forgotten that he was still supposedly standing
naked at the open window – (the Jacobean always slept raw) – or the
subject of ‘walking’ is the cock, who escapes from the barnyard,
deserts his dames, ceases to strut, and anxiously aware of the distant
hunt, trudges far afield among ploughmen and shepherds in the dale.
But why should Milton give twenty lines to the adventures of the
neighbor’s wandering cock? And why, ‘walking not unseen? Not unseen
by whom?'

Graves is not unaware of the impression he is making. ‘Please do not
think I am joking,’ he implores, and at least one critic has taken him
seriously. Herbert F. West, Jr., admits that such an accident of
mispacement is ‘possible’ and that Graves’s emendation ‘does little apparent danger to the text’ and even seems to ‘smooth over some difficult spots.’ And so it does. The poet now looks out of his window to say, quite naturally, ‘Straight mine eye hath caught new pleasures,’ and it is the Lubber fiend who walks not unseen on hillocks green where he is espied, one assumes, by plowman, milkmaid, mower, and shepherd. The sequence ends as he listens to each shepherd tell his tale under the hawthorn in the dale, making for a perfect transition to the next section, which begins with line 115: ‘Thus done the tales, to bed they creep.’ Yet Graves’s emendation should, I think, be rejected and rejected precisely because of its advantages: for by providing continuity to the plot line of the poem, it gives us something to keep track of, and therefore it gives us care. It is Milton’s wish, however, to liberate us from care, and the nonsequiturs that bother Graves are meant to prevent us from searching after the kind of sense he wants to make. ‘Not unseen by whom’ he asks, and he might well have asked, why not unseen, a formula which neither relates the figure of the walker to other figures nor declares categorically the absence of such a relation, leaving the matter not so much ambiguous as unexamined. Or he might have asked (perhaps did ask) what precisely is the ‘it’ that in line 77 ‘sees’? This question would only lead to another, for the pronoun subject is no more indeterminate than the object of ‘its’ seeing – the beauty who is the cynosure of neighboring eyes. Is she there or is she not? ‘Perhaps,’ answers Milton in line 79, relieving us of any responsibility to her or even to her existence. This in turn removes the specificity from the adverbial of place which introduces the following line: ‘Hard by, a Cottage chimney smokes.’ Hard by what? Graves might well ask. In this context or noncontext the phrase has no pointing function at all. It merely gets us unburdened into the next line and into the next discrete scene, where with Corydon and Thyriss we rest in ‘secure delight’ (91) that is, in delight se cura, delight without, or free from, care.

It is the promise of ‘secure delight,’ of course, that is at the heart of the pastoral vision, although it is the literary strength of the pastoral always to default on that promise by failing to exclude from its landscape the concerns of the real world. Milton, however, chooses to sacrifice that strength in order to secure the peculiar flatness of effect that makes reading L’Allegro so effortless. The details of this landscape are without resonance; they refer to nothing beyond themselves and they ask from us no response beyond the minimal and literary response of recognition. This lack of resonance is attributable in part to the swift succession of images, no one of which claims our attention for more than a couplet. Each couplet is self-enclosed by ringing monosyllabic rhymes, and the enclosures remain discrete. Continuity is provided by patterns of alliteration and assonance which carry us along but do not move us to acts of association or reflection. The ‘new Pleasures’ which the eyes of both speaker and reader catch are new in the sense of novel, continually new, following one another but not firmly related to one another. From lawns to mountains to meadows and then to towers, the sequence is so arranged as to discourage us from extrapolating from it a composite scene, the details of which would then be interpretable. Neither time’s winged chariot nor anything else is at the back of these shepherds, and the verse in no way compels us to translate them into figures for the young poet or the weary courtier or the faithful feeder of a Christian flock. In other words, we know and understand the quality of their untroubled (careless) joy because it is precisely reflected in the absence of any pressure on us to make more of their landscape than its surfaces present. This introduces the interesting possibility that while L’Allegro is the easier of the two poems to read, it was the more difficult to write. In Il Penseroso Milton can exploit the traditions his verse invades; in L’Allegro he must simultaneously introduce them and denude them of their implications, employing a diction and vocabulary rich in complex associations without the slightest gesture in the direction of that complexity. In L’Allegro it is not so much what the images do but what they do not do. The poem is a triumph of absence.

The figure of Orpheus as he appears in lines 145–50 is thus a perfect surrogate for the reader, the music he hears calls him to nothing, as we have been called to nothing by the verse. He is enwrapped in harmonies, resting on ‘heaped Elysian flowers’ (147) as we rest, unexercised, on the heaped (not arranged) flowers of the poem’s images and scenes, insulated from the resonances and complications which might be activated in another context (the context, in fact, of Il Penseroso). This music merely meets the ear and the ear it meets has no answering responsibility (of which there is the ‘flat absence’) beyond the passive responsibility of involuntary delight. When Graves discovered that L’Allegro was ‘rather a muddle,’ it was after many years of reading the poem. ‘I had however,’ he explains, never before ‘read it so carefully.’ The point that I have been making is that no one asked him to, and that his period of misreading began when he decided to accord the poem the kind of careful attention from which it was Milton’s gift to set us free.

It is this freedom which is banished when Il Penseroso opens by declaring ‘Hence vain deluding joys.’ ‘Vain’ here is to be taken as fruitless or without purpose, and it refers not to an abstraction, but to a mode of experiencing, a mode in which the brain is quite literally ‘idle’ because it is ‘possessed’ by a succession of ‘gaudy shapes’ and fancies ‘which ere we see them come are gone.’ This is of course the experiential mode of
Notes

2. For a similar point, see Leslie Brisman, "‘All Before Them Where to Choose': L'Allegro and Il Penseroso’, JEGP 71 (1972): 239.

For years now the blandly disseminated view of the pre-revolutionary decades of the early seventeenth century has held that the works of English literature of those years belong to a non-political world. It was a depoliticized reading made possible by an awareness of the extent and effects of censorship and a consequent refusal to decode political meanings from the literary texts. But the revolution did not suddenly appear from nowhere. And if we look at Milton's poetry of the 1630s we can see evidence of the social tensions and unmistakable assertions of revolutionary sentiments.

How radical was the young Milton? Can we find evidence of a political commitment in the poetry associated with his Cambridge years? Is there anything in the early work that looks forward to the revolutionary?

Milton's Poems of 1645 has generally been seen as an unpoltical or apolitical volume, as embodying Milton's youthful poems of the age before revolution... The 'New Critical' reading of the 1645 volume offered in the commentary by Cleanth Brooks and John E. Hardy presented a poet shorn of the political. The New Critical, depoliticizing approach to Milton was never as critically exciting as the application of the approach to the metaphysical poets. Milton never became a central figure in new critical practice, despite the earlier essay on L'Allegro and II Penseroso in Brooks's The Well Wrought Urn. But the negative aspects of the approach, the removal of the socio-political context, had their effect and the Brooks and Hardy readings achieved a pervasive influence.

Louis Martz developed the approach in his elegant essay, The Rising Poet, 1645: